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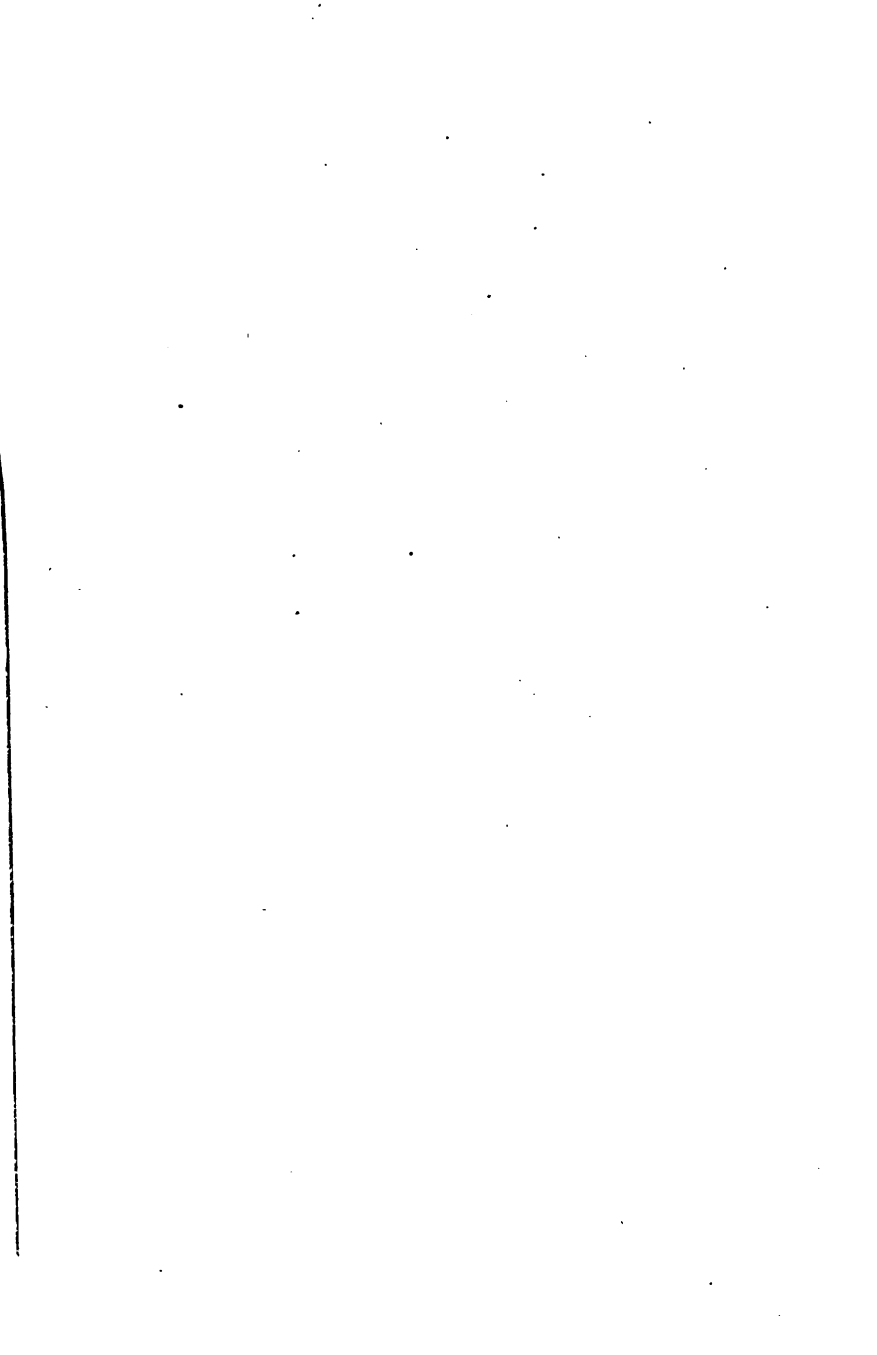
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Beside Still Waters









BESIDE STILL WATERS

BESIDE STILL WATERS

A NOVEL

BY

WILLIAM MACKAY

AUTHOR OF 'THE POPULAR IDOL,' 'PRO PATRIA,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II

London

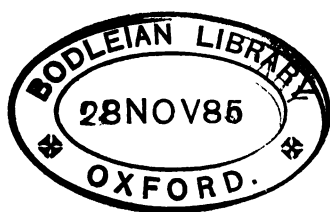
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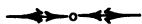
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SINS OF THE FATHERS



CHAPTER I

TOILING ALL NIGHT

SHALL the *potage* be a *bisque*? Then tell me, ye gourmets! what shall give it a flavour as delicate as that imparted by the modest shell-fish, artfully enticed from the obscure depths of a ditch. Incomparable crustacea! Denizens of those waters mis-called fresh, your name is crayfish!

Hoppy was but little learned in the sciences that centre round a dinner table, and to him

a modern *menu* would have been a mystery more profound than the shadowy hieroglyphics on the sides of Cleopatra's Needle ; but in the art and mystery of capturing some delicacies prized by the epicure, he was a proficient. Five miles inland in almost a straight line from his own tenement had he to trudge in his quest ; but the delicacies of the ditch were for the father of his young mistress, and had the miles been ten instead of five, he would have trudged them all the same.

He selected the cool of the evening for his expedition. Over his right shoulder he carried three light poles of about the same dimensions as the bottom joint of an average trout-rod, and in his left hand he held three shallow nets affixed to hoops of cane. The extreme diameter of the hoops was something under two feet. His pockets bulged with bait and balls of twine, and behind him, with his eyes immovably fixed on the iron heels of Hoppy's boots, followed

the lurcher, named Brutus in honour of the eloquent leader of public opinion who fulminated in his Sunday paper.

At the end of his five-mile pilgrimage Hoppy came to a closed gate forbidding admission to a disused meadow, in which the grass grew rank and coarse, and where nettles and dock leaves prettily alternated under the ill-kept hedges. He climbed over the gate. His lurcher, exhibiting a truly marvellous power of contraction, insinuated himself beneath its lower bar with the caution of his kind. And from mere habit—for the anxiety was quite unnecessary—Hoppy glanced up and down the field, and seeing that he was unobserved, proceeded to the farthest limit of the unkempt domain. Here, under the shadow of alders and willows, was a dreary ditch, with green slime clinging to its melancholy edges.

He dropped his tackle on the ground and proceeded with the grave deliberation of your true fishermen to affix the nets to the ends

of the three poles. Then, where under three of the most umbrageous trees, the shadow on the foul water was deepest, he dropped his already baited nets, fixing the poles in the soft earth, and permitting the meshes to be covered with not more than half-a-foot of water. Then he lit a short, black pipe, tossed a crust to Brutus, and producing from one of his pockets, the *Police News*, of the week before last, sat down to read and wait.

Had Job lived in these modern days, he would have been a fisherman.

Having waited for a considerable time, the nets were gently drawn to the surface, and the unfortunate crayfish, in the very act of devouring a meal, were lifted from their native element, and turned on to the verdant sward, surprised and panting. The nets were then re-baited and replaced. After two hours of this labour, the patient sportsman had caught some four dozen. These he turned into a bag drawn from the dark depths

of his commodious pockets. Then he collected his tackle and went off, followed by the faithful Brutus.

‘It ain’t wot the disciples ’ud call a miraklus draught,’ reflected Hoppy, mindful of some recent studies of the New Testament, ‘but it ain’t so bad, neither.’

The sky was purple with the last rays of a set sun, when Hoppy arrived at the Priory. His first question, put to Martha, was as to the health of the master. He was better, she said, had, in fact, come down stairs, and had sat for an hour in the study. His next question was as to the whereabouts of Miss Ruth. She had gone to the Vicarage. He then demanded a dish, and, emptying half the crayfish into it, informed the attentive menial that they were for the master, with best respects.

He then wended his way to the Vicarage. He did not approve of parsons as a body. But Mr O’Lympos in his private capacity had really acted so exceedingly well to Ruth

under very exceptional circumstances, that Molt felt he might, for the nonce, forget his theological scruples and without compromising his principles, sink the parson and honour the man.

Hoppy was in luck's way, for when the door was opened, Mr O'Lympos, accompanied by Carrie and Ruth, was crossing the hall. The girls seeing him, approached: his reverence following. Hoppy touched his hat.

'Made so bold as to hoffer a few crayfish; quite fresh; caught an hour ago; hope 'skuse liberty.'

Designing and prevaricating sportsman! Had Martha told him that Ruth was at the farm, the crayfish would never have been deposited at the Vicarage, but would have adorned the breakfast table of the Westaways.

'How delightful! I love crayfish,' exclaimed Carrie. 'How very good of you!' she added, making a gesture of discouragement to her uncle, who had put his hand in his pocket as if to pay for the fish, but who,

in obedience to the signal, desisted. Molt looked in a kind and approving way at Miss Dunlop, and indeed addressed his conversation chiefly to her. It was his untutored method of acknowledging her kindness to Miss Gilliat.

‘Would you like a dish o’ gudgeon for brekfiss, miss?’ he continued.

‘Above all things,’ she answered, with characteristic fervour.

‘Would you, now?’ he asked, as though to dwell on the odd and happy circumstance that he had so immediately hit upon her taste.

‘Indeed I would ; but it’s so much trouble, I’m afraid.’

Hoppy smiled with fishermanly scorn at the notion of trouble.

‘You shall ’ave ’em first thing in the mornin’. Good arternoon, ladies. Good arternoon, sir.’

And so he limped off, satisfied with the knowledge that he was leaving Ruth in

excellent company and with sympathetic friends.

‘Uncommon fine girl that,’ he said to himself approvingly; ‘wish she wasn’t agoin’ ome.’

His wish, you may depend, had no relation whatever to his own personal predilections. He was, in his dull way, proud to see Ruth taken up and petted by those who in Wapshot were regarded as leaders of society.

Then being athirst and weary, Mr Molt bent his steps in the direction of the ‘Three Feathers’ in search of beer.

At the ‘Three Feathers’ was the very exchange and mart of local gossip. From hence were sparks of rumour hurried by a sort of social centrifugal force. Since the departure of Richard Hook and the flight of Miss Parsons, but four days had elapsed, so that it wanted five of the proverbial nine, during which wonder is supposed to move the minds of men.

Mr Parsons had taken the disgrace of his

only daughter with an unruffled calm, worthy of the class to which he belonged. Polly, in fact, had not meddled with the till, and if he is not robbed in purse, a liscensed victualler will make great allowances for the aberrations of those near and dear to him. His wife, a timid, weak eyed woman, had been requisitioned from the kitchen to serve in the bar ; which, owing to the prevailing excitement, was now generally full.

When Hoppy entered, which, since his forcible removal he did under protest, and because there was not another hostlery in the village, Parsons had just commenced to read, for the edification of his customers, a letter that day received from his dear daughter. In that epistle she informed her revered father that she was going on to 'the Stag,' which that worthy man at first believed to be the sign of a public house ; but which Rymill, the vet., judging by the context, declared to be 'the Stage,' without a final 'e.' She further informed

her presumably distracted parent that she was about to be 'married' to the only man she ever loved, as soon as the 'bands' could be read in church. Hearing which, Hoppy murmured softly to himself.

'Gammon!'

Polly's lovers, yokels of substance, once deadly rivals, now mingled their sorrows and moped or swore, according to their nature. Was it slighted affection or wounded pride, that her caprice had occasioned? Who can tell? Nor indeed have we aught to do with these bucolic loves.

Mark Westaway, fine old English gentleman that he was, refused to believe that any protégé of his had made a *mésalliance* with the daughter of a tapster; and, to the great surprise of Parsons, who already began to regard him as a sort of prospective father-in-law, he resented the worthy landlord's familiarity, meeting it with a studied hauteur. At the same time he gave it as his private opinion that Polly had run off

with young Hook, and that there was no question of church at all in the matter.

Upon which Hoppy repeated aloud, and for the benefit of the company at large, the scathing dissyllable—

‘ Gammon ! ’

Westaway turned and glared at the uncouth philosopher, but Hoppy was gazing innocently and contemplatively at the paraffin lamp that swung from the blackened beam above the bar : for the night was gathering over the valley of the Thames. On this occasion no attempt was made to challenge the opinion of Mr Molt. Indeed, his known intimacy with the people at the Priory made him for the present a *persona grata*, and immense pains were taken to conciliate him and to break down the impassable barrier of his reticence. Every ornament of the bar in turn attempted to ‘ draw ’ the inscrutable Molt ; but Hoppy was not a badger of that sort ; and though in his curt way he showed himself not unwilling to discuss indifferent

subjects, nothing touching the burning topic of the hour could be elicited from him. When at ten o'clock the house was closed, no one was any the wiser by reason of the philosopher's revelations ; and so they went sorrowfully every man to his own home.

Home, but not to bed, went Mr Molt. Taking a net that hung from the side of his shanty, he drew it after him up the steps, lit a lamp, and shutting his door, proceeded to repair its lapsed meshes. From end to end the net measured over a hundred feet. Its meshes were small to the dimensions of absolute illegality, and the work of mending occupied some time. It was twelve o'clock and a dark night when Hoppy threw the apparatus over his shoulder, and leaving his enclosure, struck into the bridle path through the common and made for the river.

It was very dark on the face of the earth, though above the sky showed luminous and the stars blinked as though tired with the effort to penetrate to the world below.

Hoppy found his punt in readiness, and, still followed by Brutus, got on board, loosed the chain from the stump to which it was fixed, and pushed gently up the stream. How weird and deceptive are the night shadows on the Thames! Here a chestnut throws a defined reflection that appears a solid island—black, impassable; while again, where the shadow ceases, the river seems to wind, and taking its channel, the unhappy novice finds his craft aground.

But Hoppy could have ‘pushed’ over the course blindfold, hugging the shore and propelling his craft with slow, cautious, steady movement. Through the Riverdale backwater he moved over the lilies and among the shivering flags. The silence is profound. The heavy breathing of Brutus, the drip of the water from his pole, the ‘sop-sop’ of the wavelets under the treads of his punt: these sounds seem to fill all space. Emerging from the backwater at its upper end, and moving once more on the broad, deceitful

bosom of the river, farther passage seems stopped by a huge, black mass that crosses the entire breadth of the Thames; but Hoppy pushes on past the obstruction—a Conservancy dredger, with its attendant barge, and its dense, dark shadows reaching to the very banks. He notices, with an eye accustomed to semi-darkness, that the chains from the shore to the ugly leviathan are high in the water.

At last he reaches his destination. The bank is deep and steep, formed of red clay, and agreeably honey-combed with rat-holes. He stops under the shade of an elm, the roots of which, when the light is thrown on them, run through and down the bank like veins and muscles. Here he steadies the punt, searches in the well for a dark lantern, and having lit it with a safety match, throws its rays on the perpendicular battlement of loam. Making fast one end of the net to a pole, he pushes it down with force into the yielding bottom of the stream. Then he pays

out the net, moving up stream in his punt until he reaches the other end, which is similarly made fast, that pole also being safely fixed in the bed of the river where it touches the bottom of the bank. This done, he takes his punt pole, and moving up and down outside the net, agitates the water and shore at the other side of it, urging the startled fish within its folds.

Having thus encouraged his coy and finny victims for half-an-hour, he drew in his net, dropping his prey into the bottom of the punt, and withdrawing the last pole, proceeded to examine his take.

‘This ain’t a much more miraklus draught than t’other,’ he observed, with an air of disappointment. He was arguing in his mind whether he should try another swim higher up, when suddenly Brutus gave a low, warning growl, ending in a sharp, angry bark.

In a moment Hoppy extinguished his lantern and threw it into the well. In another he loosed his punt, and with one

powerful movement of his pole shot the craft into the stream. Then he saw through the gloom of the night a heavy boat glide out of a tributary just above the scene of his recent operations. In the pursuing boat—for it contained water-bailiffs, and it was in pursuit—one man steered while another bent to the oars. Hoppy had both to steer and propel his vessel.

‘We’ve got ’im this time, Jerry, right enough,’ said the man in the stern sheets, ‘put your back into it, sonny.’

Hoppy, with teeth hard set, went with a will, limping from stem to stern, and back again, till the perspiration poured from him. He could see that his pursuers gained. Jerry *was* putting his back into it.

A few yards more and they were close to the shadow of the Conservancy barge. It was Hoppy’s last chance. He put his punt as far in towards the barge as he dared. He had the satisfaction of seeing that the boat took its course from him. As he slid

swiftly over the submerged chain from the dredger he had the further satisfaction of feeling the outer edge of his punt graze along the iron links. Coming along at headlong speed, the pursuing boat which drew perhaps a foot of water as against Hoppy's inch-and-a-half, struck the chain with violence. The sculler fell back from his thwart, the man at the stern jumped to his feet and the boat capsized.

With grim satisfaction Hoppy peered through the gloom, and thought he saw two bailiffs struggling to the shore through the cold, inky water, and an unoccupied boat drifting slowly down the pitiless stream.

At seven o'clock next morning, Mr Molt, serene and imperturbable, presented himself at the servant's entrance to the Vicarage and left a small dish of gudgeon with the simple message,

'Tell the young lady as they're quite fresh. I caught 'em myself.'

CHAPTER II

AN ENTR'ACTE

WHILE there has still been bitter wind of North and East in the April month, I have punted up lonely back-waters in distant reaches of the Thames. There is a calm desolation in the surroundings, which is sure to bathe in a gentle melancholy the spirits of the unduly sentimental. At eventide the pale light affords some weird and sombre effects. At such times I have seen the poor charred stump of a poplar assume a sublime and romantic significance. The cold gray

shimmer on the water is touched with lemon-coloured streaks from the setting sun. Sparse thin growths shiver and tremble in the ozier beds. They have been left blooming alone. Their fairy companions are all cut, and lie tied in bundles awaiting removal to the outer world.

If you catch sight of the Weir on your emergence, you will see the stream that tumbles over it green like sea-water. As yet the purple spikes of the loose-strife are absent from the banks, nor do you note the modest grace of the meadow-sweet. But the hardy buttercup has put in an appearance, and there are daisies for those who seek them. Such a back-water is the occasional resort of the heron, an ungainly and even comic fowl, whose personal appearance has been unjustifiably ameliorated by the painter, and whose vanity has been persistently flattered by the poet. Here, too, in due season the startled kingfisher flashes past, expectant of the deadly aim of ardent Cockneys.

On such an April evening, and on such a back-water, shallow and transparent, I have not unfrequently come upon a structure cunningly built of straight upright branches held together by horizontal twigs, the interstices being filled up with brambles and rushes. This contrivance stands at the inner edge of the ait that forms the back-water. Architecturally considered, it is equal to a South African kraal. And it is decidedly superior in design to habitations which I have seen on the banks of the Barle—the retreats of those strange wild men of West Somerset, known as charcoal burners.

In a word, this triumphant example of domestic architecture is the nest of the swan.

A fox-terrier, who accompanies me in these excursions, is usually the first to discover the tenancy of the kraal. Your fox-terrier has the most curious nose in nature, and will run along the bank in front of

your craft examining every tuft of grass and stump of tree, and hole of rat upon which he happens. When he has approached within a measurable distance of the swan's abode, he will suddenly dart away with a scared expression, his hind-quarters pressed forward by the terror of his tail seeking refuge between them.

His fright is accountable. Great and ungainly, the swan rises in her nest and stretches out her wings. Those wings have not now the snowy reverse of summer, but are smeared and soiled with anxious sitting above her eggs. She stretches her neck and utters that note of battle which is neither hiss nor growl, but is a prolonged mixture of both delivered from the throat. She resents the intrusion of the public. She objects to being interviewed while in the very act of incubation. And as her cobb—who is usually keeping watch in the immediate vicinity—comes swelling and puffing

round the end of the ait, I have respected the sensibilities of madam, and pursued my innocent way.

The majority of authors imitate the excessive modesty of the sitting swan, who, to make the comparison complete, is known to ornithologists as the 'pen.' They resent the intrusion of their readers. They refuse to let the profane vulgar know how it is done. With outstretched wings and menacing voice they warn off those who would pry too nearly into the mystery of their methods.

Unfortunately for me, I have no reservations. All the world may come into my little workshop, and welcome. There is not an atom of affectation in my frankness when I tell you that this is an interpolated chapter, and that I am borrowing from the stage a method which I find highly convenient at the present juncture.

The act drop is down. While you are conversing pleasantly in your stall, the

author has contrived—with an ingenuity which is beyond all praise—an interval of a year and three months. Moreover, his first scene in the new act will open where the Thames runs brown and broad through London. A thousand lamps are reflected in its thick waters. A thousand trains run back and forward over its rattling, trembling bridges. A thousand crimes are committed within reach of its pitiless current. There the gold cross of St Paul's Cathedral, glittering in the sunlight, is caught by the eye of a voyager. There in the darkness a thud is heard, followed by a splash and a gurgle. . . .

Another circumstance, beside the mere change of time, which renders convenient this bringing down of the curtain is the necessity for a change of costume on the part of the performers. You will imagine, if you please, that the actors in this little play are in their dressing-rooms, pre-

paring for the next scene. Mark West-away, for instance, will want a little more rouge for his nose. But why too closely press these preparations?

Furthermore, the scene-shifter will have to be prepared with his autumn effects. This also takes time, and cannot, with anything like a preservation of the illusion, be done in sight of the audience.

For these, and for other reasons equally cogent, the act drop has been lowered. You, madam, can discuss the merits of the work with your husband, or with your admirer, or with whomsoever has conveyed you hither. While you, sir, may, an' you choose, retire to the saloon to smoke a cigarette, and to damn the whole thing—play, players, author and all.

‘Yes!’ I hear one grumbler object, ‘that’s mighty fine. But what about the back-water in April, and the swan, and the terrier, and the rest of it?’

Those, my excellent friend, are the effects which I have had painted on the act drop. I thought, perhaps, they might interest you while the curtain was down.

But there is no pleasing some people.

CHAPTER III

THE OTWAY CLUB

THE tinkle of the prompter's bell has brought the orchestra to a sudden finish. The act-drop—swans and all—rolls slowly up, with subdued rattle and creaking. And there is discovered to the spectator the interior of the Otway Club.

Before proceeding with the action of the piece, the Author, playing the part of Chorus, must make a few preliminary observations concerning the personages on the stage: particularly concerning Richard Hook, who

is one of the characters discovered in this famous resort.

Has Dick improved by the lapse of time? Have transplantation to London and freedom from the easy trammels of home made a better man of him? The answer to these questions will depend very much on the point of view adopted by the person who responds to them. Dick might fairly be classed among those favoured individuals whom it is customary to call our gilded youth. He was possessed of ample means. He was pleased with the pleasures of the town. He was, however, gifted with somewhat fastidious taste, and cherished one fair image which acted as a charm against many temptations.

Dick was naturally a good-tempered and vivacious young fellow. It was, however, the habit of the young men of the period to adopt a severe and even solemn demeanour. Tailors and hosiers so constructed their wares as to assist in the assumption of a

jaded and vacant expression. At the Junior Baliol — of which excellent club Richard was a member — this curious attitude was universal among the younger members. So Dick gradually fell into their ways, wore high collars of incredible tightness and stiffness, and adopted the other foolish but inoffensive peculiarities of those with whom he associated.

Underneath this outer and merely sartorial husk and shell there was the old Dick. At least, so thought Ruth, reading his weekly letters at Vicarage Farm, where they were after perusal safely deposited in an oak chest and kept securely under lock and key. It is true, that she sometimes thought that he might talk a little more seriously of his profession and his prospects. And often she sighed as she read his graphic descriptions of some gaiety at which he had assisted. But always, at the end, were those expressions of endearment—old but never stale: those love-words which have been

traced by ten thousand pens, but which bring now as much hope and consolation as when first they came fresh from a human heart.

It is, indeed, no wonder that Ruth should have been impressed by an absence of all serious mention of the profession, a member of which Dick had declared himself so anxious to become. For the fact is that Dick's studies for the bar had become most desultory. He had succeeded in getting a set of Chambers in the Temple; had purchased a very formidable law library from a barrister who had been appointed to a colonial judgeship, and who, in consequence, would require no further law; and had made many agreeable acquaintances among members of the junior bar.

Of these was a Mr D'Arcy Magee, an Irish hero, who had been 'called' some four years. English solicitors, however, failed to appreciate either his natural gifts or his legal acquirements. He had been entrusted

with but one brief, and although on that occasion he succeeded in convulsing the court with laughter, he had never been entrusted with another. His intentions on the woolsack were strictly honourable. He meant to sit there. But the lower branch of the profession formed in solid square and repulsed him. So he devoted himself to press-work—wrote leaders on law reform, on Irish land, on the Afghan frontier; in a word, on any subject given him by his editor. Moreover, he was a dramatic critic, a great person among actors and managers, and a member of the Otway Club.

This man of genius—for indeed he was no less—had on one occasion said to Dick,

‘Why the divvle a bar’net’s son should want to be a lawy’r, is what bates me entirely.’

‘I think,’ said Dick reverentially, ‘one should have a profession.’

‘If ye think so, why don’t you go for a

sojer? Why want to become the victim of a lot of rascal attorneys, who never give a man a brief, an' when they do, refuse to pay him.'

Hook smiled at the bull, but said nothing.

'I tell ye what,' went on this hereditary bondsman, 'I'd rather have me own profession, bad as it is, than hang about for a year in the hopes that a solicitor might engage me at last to defend some one at the Old Bailey for staling a watch or murderin' his mother-in-law.'

Dick was not indisposed to listen to this sort of argument. He was, it will be recollected, possessed of literary tastes; cultivated the poets; and had himself turned out many copies of verses, which had been voted excellent by his contemporaries at the University.

'But you told me that you were a member of the press?' said Dick interrogatively.

'That's all,' answered the other with true journalistic humility.

‘Surely,’ went on Dick; ‘that is a profession which requires special training, great experience, and even influence.’

‘Not a bit of it. All ye want to commence wid is a sheet of paper and a pin an’ ink.’

Dick looked doubtfully at his companion.

‘Of course,’ said the other, in answer to his companion’s expression of scepticism, ‘theyre are reporthers and sub-edithurs who want a lot of special training. An’ a great shame it is, too, that min of gaynius should have to toil as those fellows do. I give ye me word there’s a chap at our office who could write Tinnyson’s head off; but instead of that, he’s half the night and half the day correcting bastely proofs for the compositors.’

Dick tried to look sympathetic, but failed. Magee proceeded.

‘But with us it’s diff’rent. We that have free souls lade public opinion, sir. We have an eye on the Czar. We make things

mighty warrum for Misther Parnell and his frinds. An' occasionally, bedad, we have a shy at the Vatican.'

'Why,' said Dick with some surprise, 'it was only yesterday that you told me you were a Roman Catholic and a Parnellite.'

'An' so I am, me boy. I only "go for" them professionally in the paper. If I did not do it somebody else would.'

A doubtful morality, Master Richard thought to himself. It was at the conclusion of this conversation that Dick accepted Magee's invitation to the Otway Club—a member of which he subsequently became, owing to the influence of his nominator, and a beautiful elasticity discovered by the committee in the qualification rule.

The Otway Club, like many other great institutions, had sprung from small beginnings. Originally its members had met humbly in the back parlour of a tavern in the vicinity of Covent Garden. There they had smoked long clay pipes, and had quaffed

their beer from pewter pots. Sawdust was their substitute for a carpet. And their yearly subscription was an inconsiderable sum, which, however, certain of the members did not always find it convenient to pay. But there is no inherent shame in poverty, and in those days the emptiness or repletion of the pockets was no criterion whatever as to the state of the brains.

When Dick joined the Otway things had altered. The Club had ascended in the social scale. It occupied an elegantly furnished building. Champagnes of '74 were not unknown to its members. Cigars of good brands were freely smoked, and clay pipes were strictly prohibited. Persons of great social standing had sought admission—among these being a Prince of the Blood Royal. There still, however, was tolerated a certain subdued air of Bohemianism, which Dick found very charming after the frigid formality of the Junior Baliol. Indeed, his afternoons were now generally

spent at the Otway. He liked the society of actors and literary people; and they, finding him an agreeable youth, partook of his little dinners with the greatest cordiality. He blessed Magee for the introduction, and thought less seriously than ever of designs on the woolsack.

One afternoon, late in September, Magee and his literary *protégé* entered the Club together, and found the smoking-room in the sole occupancy of Brown, the celebrated burlesque writer. The great man was in a state of profound melancholy, and gazed with an expression of resentful malice at a big tumbler of brandy and soda that stood at the table by his side.

‘Well, Brown, me boy, how goes it?’ enquired Magee, in his brusque but cheery way.

‘Badly,’ replied Brown, with the air of a man who was not inclined for conversation.

‘Will your new thing at the Oddity be a success?’

‘Dunno. Ask me another.’

‘Is it finished?’

‘No,’ replied Brown, gloomily. ‘And I can’t work to-day. Went to Peter Paul’s studio last night. Result—paralysis. Look at my hand. How d’ye think my head is?’

The dramatist sighed as he said this; observed that he couldn’t understand how other fellows stood it; and vowed that the next man who caught him exceeding the bounds of moderation might cook him and eat him. Refreshing himself with a sip at the soda-water glass, he proceeded—

‘The dialogue’s all done. That come’s as easy as—as lying to an Irishman.’

‘Or infurnal rudeness to a Saxon,’ retorted the Hibernian, reddening.

‘Quite so,’ acquiesced the other. And then—half to himself and half to Magee—‘How I’m to get those lyrics in the last act done in time bothers me.’

Magee uttered an exclamation of delight.

‘Lyrics!’ he cried—‘Is it lyrics ye said?’

Me boy, your in luck's way this blessid minit. There's me frind Hook, son and heir to a bar'net, and the adopted child of the Muses.—He'll turn lyrics out for ye by the yard.'

'Is that really so?'

'Is it so? Why of course it's so. Come here, Hook, I want to inthrojuice ye to me frind Brown.'

Dick, who had been turning over the pages of the illustrated papers in the immediate vicinity, approached, and was duly presented to the eminent wit, who, recognising the gravity of the situation, asked both his acquaintances to join him in a drink. At the Otway club that was the ordinary way of inaugurating or cementing a friendship.

Notwithstanding Magee's somewhat eccentric manner, and his habitual exaggeration of language, Brown knew him to be a sound critic. He knew, moreover, that it would fall to his lot to notice the new burlesque in

a great daily paper. In accepting the proposed assistance of Magee's friend, therefore, he would at once convenience himself, and do a service to a man whom it was his interest to propitiate. His gloom disappeared. He became immensely conciliatory.

'I am told, Mr Hook, that you write poetry?'

Dick absolutely blushed with pleasure. But he was a modest youth withal, and answered—

'I should not like to call it poetry.'

'Pardon me,' replied the wag, 'you must not impugn the statement of our mutual friend, whose opinion on matters of this kind I value above any in the world.'

'Bedad, if it's not poethry, thin, Shakespeare was no pote.'

'May I inquire,' asked the writer of burlesque, 'whether you understand music?'

'I read music and I play a little,' answered Dick, delighted beyond measure. For he was the youngest member in the

Club, and had as yet done nothing to justify his membership.

‘Capital,’ said the author, affecting an excessive delight. ‘You are just the man. I want four or five sets of words written to songs already composed. Will you help me?’

‘I should be pleased to do my best.’

‘An’ his best, let me tell ye, Brown, will surprise the audience. Yer last act will be studded wid lither’y jims. They’ll wonder where the divil you got ’em from.’

Brown thought it advisable to overlook this affront. So he addressed himself directly to his more recent acquaintance.

‘Can you make it convenient to call at the Oddity Theatre this evening about nine?’

Could he? Dick was at that age when an invitation to attend a rehearsal is still delightful.

‘I shall be charmed,’ he said.

‘Come to the stage door and send your card up to me.’

Enthusiastic and sanguine youth will build on the most sandy and insufficient foundations. Already Dick imagined himself a poet and dramatist. He was a member of the Otway, and he had been asked to collaborate with the celebrated Mr Brown.

It was the story of the organist and the bellows-blower over again. ‘We did that very well,’ said the bellows-blower to the organist at the conclusion of one of Bach’s Fugues.

‘An’ what’ll ye pay me young frind for his lithery assistance?’ asked Magee, who, for an Irishman, displayed surprising business qualities.

‘I’m sure there will be no difference between Mr Hook and myself on the mere question of money.’

‘Indeed, I am sure there will not,’ replied Dick with effusion. For into his suddenly acquired dream of dramatic fame there

had entered no sordid consideration whatever.

‘Faith, it’s all very fine,’ said Magee, shaking his head in desperate disapproval of Dick’s confidence; ‘but whin I undertake lither’y work, I like an agreement in black an’ white.’

“ ‘The poet in a golden clime was born,’ ” answered Dick, quoting the Laureate.

‘That’s different. A pote borrun in a goolden clime naturally wouldn’t want for money. But, I’ll be bound to say, all the same, that Misther Tinnyson took money for writing that line.’

‘Magee, you are incorrigible,’ said the dramatic author, rising to go. ‘I shall be happy to see you at the theatre at nine, Mr. Hook.’ So saying, he took his departure.

‘What a capital fellow!’ said Dick, not unnaturally charmed and flattered.

‘A litherary imposther, me boy. We’ve

got a compositor at our office could knock dramatic fits out of him. But the connection will do you no harrum. There's a mint of money to be made out of the thee'tre.'

CHAPTER IV

‘DI’MONDS’

VAST is the enthusiasm of youth, and great its conceit. Dick dined at his West End Club that evening, chiefly with a view, I believe, of telling his particular friends there—in the strictest of strict confidence, of course—that he had been engaged to write the songs for the forthcoming burlesque at the Oddity Theatre. He was gratified to discover that the information caused the first flutter of excitement that he had seen produced in the breasts of his Junior Baliol

acquaintances. For the fact is, that such solemn and tall collared men as remained in town during September did so for the sake of some yellow-haired ornament of burlesque. They remained to assert their devotion and prove their idiotcy. Some of them possibly remained because they were not unnaturally suspicious of the unselfishness and devotion of their idols. All of them seemed well acquainted with the Oddity Theatre. They envied Hook an *entrée* behind the scenes. *They* had to wait at the stage door.

At a quarter to nine punctually the hall-porter called a cab for Dick, who looked radiant and triumphant as he descended the steps into St James's Street. For the life of him he could not help giving the direction to the commissionaire in a louder tone of voice than was customary with him.

‘Oddity Theatre—stage door!’

The commissionaire touched his cap, banged the doors of the hansom, conveyed the message to the driver, who winked in acknow-

ledgment of the intelligence, and drove through a drizzling rain up St James’s Street over the hollow-sounding wood pavement of Piccadilly, and on into the wild and narrow fastnesses of Soho. A dreary settlement is Soho at the best of times, but dreariest of all when the rain trickles down the uncleanly house fronts ; when the yellow lights from the gas-lamps are obscured by the thick moisture on the glass ; when one cannot read the foreign names above the shops, or see into the French laundries, the only clean interiors in the whole colony.

Unkempt foreigners sigh as they gaze up at the tall, gaunt houses, and rolling their cigarettes, slouch into dingy restaurants, which reek with garlic, and wherein is heard all day long the hissing of cheap meat frying in rancid oil. Fruit shops abound in the neighbourhood : though on a night like this few pedestrians will stop to investigate the coloured indecorums on the front page of comic papers from Paris, to read the piquant

legend underneath; or to gaze with envy, admiration, and despair on the photographs of adipose actresses surprisingly liberal in the display of their autumnal charms. In the window of the grocer's shop macaroni is the most prominent article of commerce. Expatriated noblemen and gentlemen from foreign climes have their clubs in this disreputable district. Behind red blinds on a first floor is heard the sound of harp, and violin, and piano, and shadows of couples moving thrown by the lamps indicate the waltz. There, you may take it, is the home of a social club. There are other institutions in the locality, however, the members of which do not affect front rooms or first floors. They are men of tragic aspect, sallow complexion, and deep voice; men of a fixed political idea, worshippers of humanity in the mass, destroyers of humanity in the individual by means of dynamite or dagger. They are Nihilists, Fenians, Communists. I would not startle you for worlds, good

reader: but if you are in the habit of traversing Soho, 'tis ten to one that you have occasionally rubbed shoulders with an experimental philosopher, who carries a charge of gun-cotton in his waistcoat pocket, or a practical politician, under whose threadbare coat is hidden a stiletto. These are thy disciples, O Brutus! the exponents of thy doctrines, O Serf!

In the very centre of this unsavoury region was situated the Oddity Theatre. The attractions of this home of the drama brought wealth and fashion into the intolerable squalor. High-stepping horses drew suddenly up at its portals, stopping a long line of other high-stepping horses in a queue behind; big lamps flashed like gorgon's eyes from the sides of broughams, and ladies descended and crossed the footway to the entrance, their jewels glittering under the very eyes of the Communists, Dynamitards, and other professors of the new political economy. Occasionally, I should have said,

this influx of fashion rolled through Soho. For the fortunes of the Oddity had been varying. A dozen years ago the lease had been taken by a lady of great personal attractions, and of some little distinction as an amateur. Although curiosity had busied itself about her history, little was really known of her, and no scandal attached to her name. She was supposed to be living apart from her husband, as in this age of progress and enlightenment so many ladies elect to do. She mixed in the better Bohemian circles with great grace, gave literary receptions and attended artistic functions; was possessed of considerable means, and was voted charming by her acquaintances. To these acquaintances and to the public this lady was known as Eunice Fleming. That this was not her real name was thoroughly understood. Nor had the efforts of hatred, malice, and uncharitableness been able to ascertain what that name really was.

When Mrs Fleming first went into management she had entertained some creditable notion of improving the public taste by the revival of old comedy. Whether it was that public taste did not elect to be improved and resented the well-meant efforts of the reformer, or whether her own rendering of the principal female characters of old comedy was considered insufficient, it is impossible and might be ungallant to say. One thing is certain, that during her season of management Mrs Fleming lost a vast amount of money. And although she still held the lease—hoping against hope for a more healthy condition of the public taste—she found it advisable to let the theatre to managers less ambitious, less conscientious, perhaps, but much more competent to feel the pulse of the playgoer.

At the time of Dick’s introduction to the great Brown, the theatre had been let to a Mr Morris, an accomplished caterer of the Hebrew persuasion, whose forefathers had

no doubt been called Moses, in honour of the great law-giver of that name. This gentleman did a little on the turf, a little in the bill-discounting line, and a great deal in other ways less reputable. He had a large connection among that class vaguely known as 'young swells,' and he understood at once how to relieve their necessities and to pander to their desires. It was by a strange irony of fate that a lady possessing Mrs Fleming's exalted notions of the dramatic art should have sub-let her theatre to a creature of the Morris description. It may be presumed, however, that she had but little idea of that speculator's more occult operations.

The theatre had been closed for about a year when Mr Morris entered into occupancy. He had no quixotic notions about the drama. Indeed, he habitually spoke of that branch of literature as the 'drammar,' and when it was mentioned to him, he 'blowed' it and 'damned' it with much heartiness. 'Give me a good leg piece,' he was accustomed to

say, ‘ with plenty of well-made gurls. That’ll dror the stalls and the gallery too.’ In this spirit he went to work in the Oddity Theatre. He had the interior re-decorated with lavish display of mirrors and gilding. The seats in stalls and boxes were recovered with yellow velvet, which brilliant material also ran along the ledge of the dress-circle. Gaudy frescoes enriched the ceiling, and a new act-drop had been painted by that eminent scenic artist, Mr Thrupp. On my little act-drop, you may remember, I displayed a couple of swans, with water all around, and perhaps a bit of river-bank, with its green rushes and delicate growths of purple loosestrife. Morris had ordered a different sort of thing altogether. Half-a-dozen undraped goddesses wandered in a grove, while Cupid, sheltered behind the statue of a Satyr, took deadly aim with his victorious bow.

When Dick jumped from his cab, he was for a moment puzzled. There was the

theatre, certainly, but it was closed ; and it stood, moreover, as one in a row of houses—with no indication of a stage entrance. The cabman, with that intuitive faculty which is the birth-right of the London Jehu, understood the hesitation of his fare, and shouted from the box—

‘Down the fust passage—an’ fust turnin’ to your left.’

Saying which he settled his dripping oil-skin cape over his shoulders, and, touching his steaming horse with the whip, rattled through the rain.

Dick stumbled into the covered lane indicated, and found himself in a melancholy yard, rendered perilous by wet uneven paving-stones, slippery and uncertain as thin ice. Turning to the left, he was relieved to see a lamp bearing the inscription ‘STAGE DOOR.’ As he approached this anything but reassuring portal, he noticed two persons standing beyond the entrance. They were a man and a woman, and were evidently

engaged in a discussion, or perhaps an altercation. He could not make them out very distinctly through the drizzle, but their dialogue was borne in upon his ear.

‘ I tell you I must have the money by to-morrow,’ said the man.

‘ And I tell you I can’t get it,’ replied the woman, with determination.

‘ Can’t you pawn a ring or something?’ suggested the man.

‘ Hush ! There’s someone coming,’ said the woman, as the sound of Dick’s step was heard over the greasy cobbles of the grimy yard.

The dramatist in embryo turned into the dirty and close-smelling passage that stood beyond the stage door, and addressed himself to an unshaven old man who sat behind a desk in a glazed recess to his right.

‘ Will you kindly take my card to Mr Brown ? I have called by appointment.’

In a surly tone, rendered doubly un-

pleasant by chronic asthma, the Cerberus replied—

‘I’ll sen’ it hup when summun passes through.’

There was nothing to do but to wait. Fortunately the delay was not long. The lady whom he had seen in the melancholy yard swept into the narrow passage in a whiff of patchouli. She wore a long sealskin jacket, trimmed with sable, and reaching nearly to her heels. Her hands were large, and her fingers covered an inch deep with rings—diamonds among them sparkling as brilliantly as though they shone on the delicate hands of a duchess. She had a fine round face and big black eyes. Her eyelashes were dark but her hair was golden. Her lips and cheeks were painted, her eyes and eyelashes ‘made-up’ with black. She had evidently called in the assistance of art to counteract the ravages effected by late hours and indigestible suppers, by heated rooms and heavily liquered champagne.

And — sad to relate ! — she was quite young.

Cerberus, addressing himself to this captivating exponent of the British Drama, as though she were an inferior menial, handed Hook’s card to her, and wheezed out,

‘ Take this to Mr Brown.’

‘ Say “ please,” ducky,’ said the girl, with a smile.

‘ Ugh !’ answered the stage-door keeper, sitting down again in his den and bending his head over the evening paper.

The lady turned her big bold eyes—eyes rendered artificially bright—full on Dick, smiled at him in a way that was intended to fascinate, but which was, strange to say, mistaken by the young gentleman—who was new to the town, you must remember—for brazen familiarity. Then she departed, as she had arrived, in the odour of patchouli.

Where had he seen that face before ? Ah ! where, indeed !

A messenger from the Unseen World be-

hind the scenes, a precocious imp of fifteen summers, presently appeared to conduct him into the presence of the great burlesque writer. When, following his guide, he emerged from the half-lights of the passage through a second door, he found himself on the stage, his ore idea was that of unutterable confusion. First his eye strayed to the proscenium, where gas-lights were burning only here and there, and where workmen were busy gilding, and hammering, and upholstering.

In the middle of the stage, with his back to the footlights, sat a shaven-faced man with a table in front of him. This gentleman's sphere of usefulness seemed to consist in swearing a quantity of very highly ornate and original oaths, with a view of stimulating the histrionic ambition of the performers. He was the stage manager. There were about forty or fifty members of the company on the stage, all attired in the ordinary costume of everyday life. A great

number of them bore a strong family resemblance to the lady whom Dick had seen at the stage door. There were the same long sealskins, the same yellow hair, the same stereotyped smile, and above all, the same diamonds sparkling on finger or in ear. These gorgeous damsels spoke with great freedom to the male members, permitted the tenor to chuck them under the chin and pinch their painted cheeks, and had for each with sickening iteration that stale diminutive ‘ ducky.’ Dick had been long enough about town to know that these bedecked, bejewelled, bedizened artistes were the chorus ladies, aptly and cynically described by one of their managers as the vestals who tend the sacred lamp of burlesque.

‘ You’re just in time,’ said Brown, bustling up. ‘ Herr Stoker is in the Green Room. They’re going to rehearse a bit of the dialogue. He’ll play the music over, and tell you what it’s about.’

So Dick was hustled to the Green Room,

conscious of the fact that the vestal with the big eyes was leering at him, and talking of him to her painted companions.

His business with Herr Stoker, the grumpy conductor — he was a classical musician, and a believer in Wagner, by some freak of fortune condemned to produce the most vulgar inanities of the French *opera bouffe* school — was soon ended. He took away with him copies of the music, four songs in all, and promised to have the words by the morning.

Brown thanked him with the utmost apparent sincerity, and threading his way through the groups of men and women, saw him right to the stage door. Arrived there, Richard inquired, not without a blush, as fearing that Brown might misconstrue his motive.

‘Who is that big woman with the large black eyes and such a lot of diamonds?’

‘That’s Baby Parsons.’

Dick became suddenly illuminated. *Now*

he knew where he had seen that face before. He continued his inquiries with aroused interest.

‘ But can she dance ? ’

‘ A little.’

‘ Sing ? ’

‘ A little less.’

‘ Act ? ’

‘ Not at all.’

‘ Then what *can* she do ? ’ asked Dick, in amaze.

‘ That would be hard to say,’ answered the author with a smile ; ‘ she has the finest limbs of any woman in the company, and don’t object to showing ’em. In pink tights, you know—for decency’s sake or for the sake of suggesting flesh tints, I don’t know which. She keeps a brougham and a bank account. She loves a lord—or *says* she does. And a lord loves her—or *thinks* he does. What more would you have in a chorus woman ? ’

Dick thought it was quite enough in all conscience.

‘And who,’ he asked, ‘was that pretty vivacious-looking little woman who came into the green-room? The little woman in the plain black silk, I mean, with the neat little hat, the one ring, and no paint?’

‘D’ye mean to tell me that you didn’t recognise her? Ask the newspaper critics who she is. Ask the boys in the gallery who she is. Or the old playgoers in the pit—they’ll tell you. Why, that’s Jenny Frampton—the life and soul of every piece she appears in. The very spirit and essence of burlesque. She’s got to sing two of your songs, by the way. After that you won’t ask who she is, I’ll be bound. Excuse me, I must get back to the stage. Meet me at the Otway to-morrow at noon—with the songs. Don’t forget. *Au revoir.*’

And he was off.

When Dick reached the street, a loudly dressed man was pacing up and down on the

pavement in front of the theatre. He swaggered a good deal, carried an umbrella over his head, and smoked a cigar of very doubtful nationality, but of indubitable strength and flavour. He was pacing up and down as if waiting for somebody. Dick observed this as he waited for a cab to pass. Before the arrival of a vehicle he had an opportunity of catching sight of the man's face. The man was Jim Gates.

CHAPTER V

A BUDDING PLAYWRIGHT

WHEN the curtain descended on the last Act of 'She Stoops to Conquer,' the friends of Oliver Goldsmith looked about for that extraordinary man. They were willing that he should receive their congratulations, and listen to the larger if less appreciative applause of the public. But, according to the biographers, Oliver was not to be found. He mistrusted his own work, and, dreading failure, had run away. He would not incur

the chance of witnessing the awful act of damnation itself.

Your playwright of to-day is afflicted with no such ridiculous pangs. He has none of Goldsmith's modesty. Perhaps, also, he possesses little of Goldsmith's genius. He will come bowing and smiling before the curtain at the slightest provocation. Indeed, I have known him to come forward without any encouragement whatever, accepting the groans, and hisses, and cat-calls of his friends in front, as if they were demonstrations of approval and delight.

Richard Hook, therefore, must not be censured too severely in that he took his tone from the time in which he lived, and from the men among whom he moved. The sudden novelty of his position as a dramatist—for, on the strength of those lyrics of his, Dick regarded himself as one of the select band who produce plays—pleased him beyond measure. He was like a child with a new toy. And having received the com-

mendation of Mr Brown, he felt that his success as a writer of stage plays was assured.

In this frame of mind he was delighted to receive a note from Carrie Dunlop. Her venerable relative, the Earl, had been called to London, and she had accompanied him. They were stopping at Claridge's, where Dick was invited to call without delay. Carrie was just the sort of girl to sympathise with his theatrical projects, receiving his confidences with all the seriousness to which their importance entitled them. He ran off at once, and found Miss Dunlop in a sitting-room with a faded gentlewoman who worked at embroidery, spoke only when spoken to, and who sighed intermittently without any request at all. This was Carrie's companion. The greeting between the friends was cordial, though scarcely a month had passed since they met in town. Nor did Miss Dunlop's re-appearance in the metropolis appear to afford her unmixed satisfaction.

‘Isn’t it a shame to drag us back here? The shooting is so awfully good, and there’s such a nice party at Castle Fermer.’

Indeed, Carrie and her uncle had been visiting at Sir Seton Fermer’s place in Hampshire with a view to partridges.

‘Nothing the matter with Lord Ballymacarret, I trust?’ inquired Dick.

‘Oh, dear, no; only something the matter with Mr Gladstone. They don’t seem to be able to get on without uncle. He’s at the Foreign Office now, and is going off to Berlin, or St Petersburg, or Vienna—heaven knows where.’

‘Indeed!’

‘Yes. He telegraphed to them that he was confined to his room with the gout. But apparently they didn’t believe him, for they sent a messenger down with a big official document. So uncle swore a little, and here we are.’

‘Gout and all?’ asked Dick.

‘The gout is much better. It was one of those very sudden attacks.’

‘I understand. It came on with the arrival of the first message from Downing Street, and departed on the receipt of the second. Is the business important, I wonder?’

‘Oh, it’s sure to be when they send for Lord Ballymacarret—a Royal marriage, or another concession to Russia, or a little arrangement with the Vatican. Uncle is always entrusted with delicate missions, though I’m sure in the affairs of private life there is no man more confused and worrying.’

‘He is the right man in the right place, then. It is the object of the accomplished diplomatist to confuse and worry. Lord Ballymacarret should be a man after the Prime Minister’s own heart. Does his lordship go alone?’

‘No. Lord Hampton goes with him.’
There was a slight accession of colour in

Carrie's cheek, as she pronounced the name—an indication which the dramatist of the future did not fail to note.

‘And you say it was a *very* pleasant party down at Fermer's?’

‘Very.’

‘Was Lord Hampton there?’

‘He was.’

‘And where are you going to stay?’ went on the persistent young gentleman.

‘With Uncle Fitz, of course. And I am very selfish to complain, for I'm sure I shall be delighted to get back to Wapshot once more.’

‘I wish you could stay in town till after the production of my play,’ remarked Dick, in a casual way, as if the production of a drama were an everyday occurrence with him.

‘Your play! Have you really written a play, Dick?’ inquired Miss Dunlop, with evident interest.

‘Well, I have assisted in writing one,’

replied Dick vaguely, and with characteristic magnanimity, determined to give Brown credit for *his* little share in the matter.

‘And what is it about? And where is it to be played? and when?’ asked Miss Dunlop all in a breath.

‘It’s a burlesque,’ replied Dick, ‘and it is to be produced at the Oddity Theatre on next Saturday week.’

‘Oh! I do so hope it will be a success,’ said Carrie, with evident sincerity, ‘and Ruth will be so pleased and proud.’

Dick frowned slightly. He was not quite sure that Ruth would regard with unmitigated pleasure his connection with a play-house. Her father’s views on the theatre were very pronounced; and she probably sympathised with them.

‘And they tell me that dramatic writers make such *immense* fortunes,’ went on Carrie, with enthusiasm.

‘They do pretty well,’ replied Dick, as one of their number, and with authority.

‘So that you’ll be able to act independently of Sir Penton and marry whom you like,’ suggested Carrie, inciting this rebel to further resistance of the paternal rule.

‘Carrie, you’re an angel!’ exclaimed Dick, ‘the very thought that was in my own mind.’

And this two-days’ old dramatist—this author of a few sets of burlesque doggerel—already beheld himself paying cheques of thousands into his bankers, defying the Roman father and marrying the girl of his choice.

‘It must be so nice to have a choice in such matters,’ sighed Carrie.

‘And so reasonable,’ continued Dick, thinking only of his own case.

‘So practicable,’ added the girl, with an ironical tone in her voice.

Dick caught that note, so sad, and so satirical. He said—

‘Carrie, I believe—I believe’—

‘What do you believe, Sir Wizard?’ she

asked, with her accustomed gaiety of manner.

‘I believe that you’re in love.’

She shook her head.

‘Then you’re engaged?’

‘That is almost true. This afternoon I must say the irrevocable word.’

‘I wouldn’t if I didn’t like the fellow,’ said Dick in his dogged way.

‘But I never said that I *didn’t* like the fellow, as you call him.’

‘You looked it,’ answered Dick, with directness.

‘Then my looks did me less than justice. I do like him. Your position is so different to mine. I am an orphan. I am twenty-one years of age. I am not without ambition. I must think of settling. And if I can please myself a little, and gratify Lord Ballymacarret a great deal, I don’t think I should hesitate.’

The faded and depressed companion here coughed as though at once to remind the lady

and gentleman of her presence, and to apologise for it. Carrie dropped her voice, as she continued—

‘ Ah ! Dick, it must be pleasanter to write comedies than to live them.’

The embryonic author was receiving confidences as though he were a select female friend or a favourite father confessor.

‘ Is he a good sort of chap ?’ he inquired, with quite a paternal interest in the lady’s future happiness.

‘ He is young and good-looking. He is clever and ambitious. He is a friend of the Premier’s, and he has forty thousand a-year,’ answered Carrie.

‘ Which means that he’s a prig,’ said Dick, decidedly.

‘ Some day he will be a Cabinet Minister.’

‘ What of that ?’ replied Dick, contemptuously, and looking down on such institutions as Cabinets from the lofty elevation of the stage. ‘ What does a man with forty thousand a-year want in a Cabinet, working

like a nigger for the wages of a puisne judge?’

‘He wants power, influence, fame. Did I not understand his aims, and sympathise with his aspirations, I would not marry him for all his money ten times told.’

‘Then you *will* marry him?’

‘Yes.’

‘And who is this—this paragon?’

‘Lord Hampton.’

‘I thought so.’

This observation of Dick’s was by no means so gracious as it might have been. He felt that in a moment, and hastened to make reparation. In his frank, boyish way, he blustered out—

‘I congratulate you with all my heart, Carrie. By Jove! the best man in the whole world isn’t good enough for you. And if I spoke ungraciously, it was because I felt that whoever you have must fall short of what you deserve.’

‘What a long speech, Master Richard!

The air of town agrees with you. I declare you have become quite a gallant.'

'I mean what I say,' replied Dick, not liking the tone of raillery.

Once more the companion coughed in assertion of and apology for her existence; and on this occasion, also, to notify the fact that footsteps were approaching. The handle of the door turned, and Lord Ballymacarret and Lord Hampton entered the room.

Lord Ballymacarret did not look particularly pleased at discovering the visitor whom his ward was entertaining, and he looked sharply at the Paragon to see what effect the discovery had on him. But for any sign either of pleasure or of pique that appeared on the passive countenance of the young earl, it might have been that of the Sphinx. The elderly man did not allow his annoyance to appear to Dick, who had, indeed, during the season been a constant guest at his house. He greeted him with a perfect assumption of cordiality, and intro-

duced the young men, who bowed with a gravity that became their years. Miss Dunlop, with great readiness and good-humoured tact, speedily put all three gentlemen at their ease; and the companion coughing, in intimation of her departure, took up her embroidery and withdrew.

Between the two peers there was a great contrast. The Irish lord was tall, large-boned, and loosely made, with gray whiskers and a thin bronzed face. Lord Hampton was a dapper, elegantly-attired man. His face was clean shaved, and his hair brushed smoothly above his forehead. He was perfect in his manners, and not without a certain courtly grace. Yet he was below the middle height; and in the shape of his collar, the cut of his trousers, and the horse-shoe pin in his white scarf, inevitably put one in mind of a jockey. And, indeed, his lordship's love of the turf was notorious, and the sums he spent in training at Newmarket fabulous. It was his

ambition to win the Derby and to be Prime Minister of England.

‘Well, my lord,’ asked Carrie, ‘which is it to be—Rome or Russia, the Tuileries or Timbuctoo? Do we go to wage a war or to conclude a peace? Are we armed with Gatling guns or olive branches?’

‘We are armed, my dear,’ replied the old man, gravely, ‘with humble pie.’

Carrie frowned and bit her lip, as she replied—

‘It’s shameful! We have been eating humble pie in every corner of the earth. We have had a surfeit of it. If I were Queen of England I shouldn’t permit my Ministers to do it.’

Although Lord Ballymacarret shook his head in deprecation of his niece’s display of insubordination, his expression was that of pride and pleasure. He said—

‘As a nation, we are getting quite used to the diet. I believe it agrees with us.’

‘And I accompany his lordship to see

that he makes no wry faces,' Lord Hampton added, in a peculiarly soft and winning voice. 'By the way, Miss Dunlop, if I may judge from your tone, you are no supporter of the Ministry.'

'I don't suppose they would care much for my support. And if my opinion had any weight, they would not be in power another day.'

This from a lady to whom he had offered his name, was encouraging to a Liberal peer, having well founded expectations of office.

'And what *are* your politics, Miss Dunlop?' he asked.

'I don't know,' she replied, dropping the serious tone which never sat easily on her. 'Sometimes I think I should be a good old Tory, like Uncle Fitz. Sometimes I feel like a Red Republican, and am disgusted with both parties.'

'“A plague o' both your houses,” eh?' quoted Lord Ballymacarret. 'And now I must ring for my man. We start for Paris

to-night, and you, my child, will go down to Wapshot and discuss Conservatism and fly-fishing with your uncle Fitz.'

Dick felt that the time to take leave had arrived. He bid Good-bye to Carrie and the diplomatists, conscious that every moment he remained delayed the Irish beauty's acceptance of a peerage, a future Minister, and her share of forty thousand pounds a-year.

As he lit his cigarette, and strolled down Bond Street, he was saying to himself—

'I wonder will she be as jolly when she's a Countess!'

CHAPTER VI

WORKING THE ORACLE

‘Is Baby Parsons to have a good part?’

Dick was the centre of an admiring group of three adolescent patrons of the drama, standing at the window of the Junior Baliol Club, and gazing on the emptiness of the September Street.

‘Of course not, Chubby,’ replied Dick, in a superior tone, and as if the cast of Brown’s burlesque had been left entirely to himself; ‘and I can’t think what you fellows see in Miss Parsons.’

‘Doosid fine woman,’ explained patron number two.

‘Her father keeps a beer-house in my native village,’ objected Dick.

‘Lord Rugby’s awful spoons on her,’ said patron number three.

‘Goin’ to marry her, *I* hear,’ added Chubby.

‘I think *not*,’ said Dick, oracularly.

‘And why not?’ asked Chubby, whose relations with Lottie Laud were notorious.

‘What! And have a riparian tapster for a father-in-law. No,’ answered Dick, with decision.

‘Pull down his sign, and call his pot-house the “Rugby Arms” most likely,’ suggested patron number two.

‘The man who marries his mistress is a fool for his pains,’ went on Dick, with the gravity of an experienced man of the world.

‘Why?’ asked Chubby, with aroused interest.

‘Because by becoming his mistress she

proved that she didn't value her *own* name. How, then, is she likely to respect *his* ?'

'You're a perfect Martin Whatsaname,' said Chubby, 'the proverbial fellow, I mean.'

'Commendation from Sir Hubert Stanley is praise indeed,' said Dick, bowing.

'That's out of Shakspeare, ain't it?' asked patron number two.

'Yes; if by *out* of it you mean not *in* it.'

'Who said it?' inquired Chubby, who was interested in the smallest items of theatrical intelligence.

'Only Madison Morton,' replied Dick, with all a rising author's sensitiveness touching the sacredness of dramatic rights.

'I say, Hook,' said Chubby, 'you ought to get a notice of your songs in the *Tipster*.'

'What's that?' inquired Dick, innocently.

'What's the *Tipster* ? Come, now, that is good. Why, everybody reads the *Tipster*. They call it a sporting paper, but it's full of jokes and information about the dramatic affairs of ballet women.'

‘Its dramatic critic is a Jew cad,’ said one of the callow patrons, ‘a sort of a cross between a pimp and a money-lender’s tout.’

‘Ah! that’s because he slated Tottie De Vere,’ replied Chubby, with malice. ‘You can’t expect every one to think as much of her as you do—don’t you know? I tell you, Hook, he’s a rattlin’ good fellow. But come down Fleet Street and I’ll introduce you to the lot of them. They’re all rattlin’ good fellows.’

Dick hesitated, and Chubby waxed eloquent concerning the merits of his literary friends.

‘I tell you Fleet Street is awful fun. They drink whisky there like anything, and write about it after. All the chorus girls take in the *Tipster*, it’s so devilish smart, don’t you know.’

‘Good judges of literature. Clever women, I should think,’ said Dick, with a sneer.

‘First-rate,’ replied Chubby, with the

utmost sincerity ; 'and begad some of 'em write for it, too.'

'You amaze me.'

'They do, indeed. But come and see the fellows. We'll ask 'em to lunch at the Roman's: awful witty chaps at lunch, don't you know.'

'I fear I might find such brilliant company overpowering.'

'Not a bit. Stand 'em plenty of "the Boy"—that's champagne, don't you know; and whoever they abuse, it won't be *you*, I promise you. Perhaps, too, they'll print one of your jokes in the paper. They printed one of mine *once*.'

'That inducement is irresistible, Chubby. To Grub Street! March!'

The adolescent patrons had moved off. Chubby's favourite organ of the press was a sore subject for one of them. The dramatic critic of the *Tipster* had, indeed, pointed out, in that tone of refined and gentlemanly banter for which he is famous, that Miss Tottie De Vere had taken more wine than

was good for her, what time the Baddeley cake was cut on Drury Lane's historic stage. And he had further, in a light satirical spirit, given a sketch of her girlhood's happy days in the house of her mother, the washer-woman. These comments were made, be it observed, strictly in the interests of morality and dramatic art—two things which are practically inseparable—and not because the indiscreet Tottie had repulsed the advances of the critic.

It would be impossible to adduce a more striking comment on the depravity of taste exhibited by a certain section of modern society than the success of the *Tipster*. As the name of the journal indicates, it was an organ of the Turf professing to give inspired advice as to what horses would win what handicaps. Its efforts in this direction had proved somewhat disappointing to the subscribers, its circulation had dwindled, and at last it was known to be in a moribund condition. At this critical juncture it was pur-

chased by one Jew for a trifling sum of money borrowed from another. The purchaser—a Mr Jacobson—was a sporting prophet of repute, if indeed that adjective may be used in such a connection. The new proprietor had ideas of his own about the conduct and destiny of his purchase. He associated himself with one or two needy men of talent. To these he entrusted the task of writing ‘smart’ paragraphs, by which he was understood to mean paragraphs flavoured now by scandal and now by indecency. These literary gems brought him sometimes under the ban of the censor of the press, and sometimes into the dock at the Old Bailey. But in a year the unsavoury reputation of the paper was made. It became the recognised organ of the *jeunesse dorée*. Men about town pronounced it ‘good form’ to take it in. The smaller lights of the theatre adopted it as their spokesman. It was considered in certain sets a test of social standing to identify the owners of its *noms de plume*

and the meaning of its pass-words. It became a prime favourite in the boudoirs of St John's Wood, and its humours were eagerly discussed in the bed-rooms of South Belgravia.

Mr Jacobson, who was about as capable of an epigram as is an elephant, took credit for all the good things in his paper, and built himself up a wonderful reputation as a wit and a *bon-vivant*. The latter character he sustained by much promiscuous dining; and the former by devoting a great deal of time and labour to the study of Joe Miller. He had, moreover, adopted a very strong line of politics, and had really arrived at the conclusion that the *Tipster* had become a great political power. In appearance, this Great Accident was an unmistakable Hebrew, with large, sensual lips, a hook'd nose, and a heavy jowl. In his address he affected a bluff, hearty manner—a sort of honest-John-Barleycorn air—under which, however, were concealed the racial characteristics of craft, cunning, and insincerity. His

staff, studying his humours, flattered him to his face, while, behind his back, they ridiculed his pretensions, and mimicked his vulgarities.

It was into the office of this extraordinary leader of public opinion that Chubby introduced Dick. The great man who professed himself ready to prophesy the winner of a race at Kempton, or the fate of a Ministerial measure, sat in the editorial chair, the members of his staff standing round him in various attitudes, expressive of admiration and devotion. The air was full of tobacco smoke, and an empty magnum of champagne stood on the table, surrounded by half-a-dozen empty tumblers. The most obsequious of these satellites was a broken-down military man, who, since his withdrawal from the army, had travelled the country under four *aliases*, and who now added to his earnings by openly defying the Betting Act of 1874. The dramatic critic—a co-religionist of Mr Jacobson's—was an over-dressed little man, with gold bangles on

his wrists, and a big gardenia in his button-hole.

Chubby was evidently a favourite in this editorial sanctum, and was greeted with bear-like warmth by the proprietor. Indeed, it was the *Tipster* that had given him his nickname of Chubby—the *Tipster* had an amazing gift for that sort of thing—Chubby having been adapted from his college soubriquet of the Cherub. Chubby's real name was Tom Dasent; he was the son of Dasent, the brewer, was possessed of a liberal allowance, and had one or two 'crocks' in training. Which circumstances had not a little to do with the fervour of Mr Jacobson's greeting.

As a friend of Chubby's, Dick had an equally gracious reception from Mr Jacobson and his young friends, and the conversation became general, animated, and for the most part unintelligible. Drunken adventures were related, and received with shouts of hilarity. Amours of the *coulisses* and the kitchen were told with unaffected drollery.

And hair-breadth escapes from sheriff-officers were narrated as episodes at once creditable and distinguished. Had Dick not shrewdly suspected that these jocund confidences were mere harmless affectations, he might have supposed that he had happened upon a select society recently released from the hulks. If these candid young gentlemen were to be believed, one third of their time was passed in robbing tradesmen, another third in a state of drunken paralysis, and the balance in roaming abroad after Venus the Pandemian.

Casual mention of the theatre gave Chubby the opportunity of mentioning Dick's songs, and craving for them the kindly consideration of the dramatic critic.

'Certainly,' said the genial Jacobson, 'and if you like we'll print one of them in the *Tipster*. Our best things come from outsiders.'

The latter shaft was directed at the staff, who laughed at the 'Guv'nor's' humour,

as in duty bound, and declared they had never known the old man to be in such excellent spirits.

‘You are very kind,’ answered Dick, without, however, much warmth in his tone.

‘And you can pay me for the paragraph, Chubby,’ said Jacobson, with the light and airy playfulness of a Behemoth, ‘by securing for me your father’s interest when I stand for Hopshire in the Conservative interest.’

‘Why, cert’nly,’ answered Chubby, who, under the circumstances, would promise anything and everything.

At this moment the door of the office was flung open, and in walked a dandy, in a tweed suit, low hat, flaming red handkerchief, and milk-white spats over his patent leather boots. He was smoking a big cigar, and was greeted by the others with a joyous and unanimous shout of—

‘Hallo, Jim!’

Dick could hardly believe his eyes. It

was Jim Gates. Jim was indeed one of the most favoured and full-flavoured of the *Tipster's* contributors. He had sense enough to affect ignorance of Dick's identity, and that gentleman vexed, at finding himself in the same room with a scoundrel so abandoned, and dreading an introduction, drew out his watch, declared that he had an appointment, and nodding good-bye to his new-made friends, left the editorial office of the *Tipster* never to enter it again. He rushed down the stairs, three steps at a time, followed by the greatly wondering Chubby.

'Ain't they a jolly set of chappies?' asked the latter when they had reached the street.

'Very,' replied Dick drily.

'But you say that as if you didn't mean it.'

'And I *don't* mean it. I wish you had never asked a favour for me from that man.'

'Nonsense, Dick! He's an awfully good sort. A bit vulgar and bumptious, don't

you know ; but awfully clever and uncommon sound in his politics.'

'Bah ! It made me sick to hear him talk of representing a county ; and I declare, to listen to him pitching into Mr Gladstone, made me feel almost induced to turn Liberal.'

Meanwhile, Mr Hook was being discussed by the occupants of the sanctum.

'Who is that very offensive person ?' asked Mr Aaron, the dramatic critic.

'That,' said Jim Gates, who, it must be confessed, had reason to remember Dick, 'is the only son of Sir Penton Hook, who lives in my part of the country, and is a great friend of my father's.'

Now Jacobson loved lords and baronets, and all kinds of aristocrats ; and the more smirched and soiled their reputation, the more he doted upon them. He retailed his choicest cuttings from Joe Miller for their edification, and 'my-lorded' them with persistent iteration of a flunkey. Hearing this

good account of his late visitor, he turned to his dramatic critic and said—

‘See, that he gets a good note about his songs.’

‘I will,’ said Aaron, ‘if Morris sends me two stalls. Last time he had the infernal impertinence to send me a dress circle.’

‘Stalls or no stalls, you give him a good notice,’ said Jacobson.

‘All right,’ said Aaron aloud. But he whispered to Gates, who seemed by no means displeased at the intelligence.

‘He’s a stuck-up little puppy. And I’ll give him a damned good slating.’

And he did.

When Brown’s burlesque was produced, this is what the *Tipster* said of poor Dick’s lyrics :—

‘Mr Brown’s unaided genius having at the last moment been found unequal to the task of writing the songs for the new burlesque at the Oddity, literary assistance was called in at the eleventh hour. The collaborating poet is a certain Mr Hook, whose claims to dramatic fitness are founded on the fact that, owing

to some laxity on the part of the committee, he is a member of the Otway. His songs are unmitigated drivel. Luckily Mr Hook is successor to a baronetcy, and heir to a fortune. He therefore can afford to dispense with the brains with which Nature has not seen fit to endow him. He should, however, hesitate before again torturing those who pay to be amused. By the way, Baby Parsons, in pink tights and a blue tunic, looked very snappy. This is an opinion which is evidently shared by Lord Rugby, who had a stage box all to himself, and who appeared to take quite a fatherly interest in the performance of that very good-looking young woman.'

And this was the result of Chubby's good-natured attempt to work the oracle. Probably Morris had sent Aaron only *one* stall.

CHAPTER VII

THE SACRED LAMP

UNDER the Morris management confidence was restored to the Oddity Theatre. On the night of the production of Brown's new burlesque, that re-decorated bandbox of a playhouse was filled with an audience expectant, noisy, and enthusiastic in pit and gallery; subdued but distinguished in the stalls and boxes.

There is really no accounting for the taste of the town, particularly in matters theatrical. When Mrs Fleming, at vast expense, and

with the most creditable motives, played good old English comedies, lavishly mounted and efficiently cast, her pit was sparsely occupied by half-hearted playgoers. A whistle from the almost empty gallery echoed through the house like the shriek of a lost and lonely spirit. While awful persons, ill-dressed and self-conscious, came in omnibuses from distant suburbs and shivered awkwardly in the silent stalls. But now that Morris had re-lit 'the sacred lamp of burlesque' the West Central slum in which his theatre was situated was blocked with carriages, and the lights of smart broughams shone through the darkness of the thoroughfare.

On the night when a new extravaganza was presented at the Oddity even the critics had to be content with back seats. The two front rows of the stalls had been booked three weeks before by Chubby and other youthful patrons. They nobly resisted the temptation of the September stubble and

sat, solemn and inscrutable, supporting the higher walks and best interests of the British drama. Wealthy members of the Hebrew persuasion rallied round Morris. Their hook'd noses, pomaded ringlets, and oleaginous smiles produced a pretty effect, while their adipose spouses sat beside them clad in silks and satins that would have been the envy of Solomon, and wearing sufficient jewellery out of which to weld a second golden calf.

Persons of distinction in society, but of less gorgeous exterior, also assembled to witness the new trifle. But no sight presented in the house was more grateful and re-assuring than that of the critics nodding to and beaming upon each other with the greatest good humour. They let brotherly love continue. Like actors themselves, dramatic critics are a long-lived race. Year after year one sees the same faces in the stalls; and, indeed, week after week, listens to the same sage deliverances. The loving kind-

ness which they extend to each other is accorded to the performers on the stage. Bad, indeed, must be the performance which can disturb their imperturbable expression of satisfaction. The ungentlemanly habit of finding fault with actors is happily a thing of the past. Had 'Junius' lived in these days and applied to the favourite actor the offensive epithet of 'mountebank,' he would most probably have been dragged into light and, impious scribbler, made to repent his temerity.

It is true that in conversation their comments did not always tally with their more carefully considered essays in the press. Thus, during the progress of the play, Dick happening upon two of them in the *foyer*, overheard certain snatches of dialogue which caused him to tremble for the success of the play. The one critic was Mr Slaughter, the proprietor of the trade organ of the theatrical profession. The

other was Mr Carew, the critic of the *Earwig*.

‘I think it wants cutting down,’ ventured Mr Slaughter.

‘And I think it wants cutting *up*,’ replied Mr Carew.

‘I don’t care for the way it’s dressed,’ went on the owner of the trade organ.

‘The way it’s *undressed*, you mean to say,’ suggested the other.

Mr Slaughter was a dull, earnest person, and despised jokes, because he could only understand those that were broad and obvious, so he said, with a poor assumption of dignity—

‘I meant what I said, Mr Carew. In criticising performances of the kind I invariably adopt a line of my own.’

‘And that line is apparently the clothes-line,’ retorted Carew, turning on his heel and making his way to his stall.

But we have advanced matters. The curtain is not yet up. The orchestra is

engaged in playing that medley of Music Hall airs which does duty for an overture. The gallery packed to repletion sends forth the cheerful cat-call, while the accomplished playgoers in the front row of the pit are with varying success attempting to identify the celebrities in the stalls. Thus a bland official from the Lord Chamberlain's office is triumphantly pointed out as the critic of the *Jupiter Tonans*. Little Seal of the *Mercury* is indicated as a noble member of the Jockey Club. Lord Alfred Paget is by a great number of pittites recognised as Mr Gaston — 'the Prince of English Journalists,' as his brethren of the press delight to call him. While 'Brutus,' who not only writes the politics for the Sunday organ of republicanism, but also supplies its dramatic notices, is descried by a groundling with a turn for exploration, sitting in the front row of the dress circle, and is at once ascertained to be the Right Hon., the leader of the Opposition in the House of Commons. The same authority

alleges our friend D'Arcy Magee to be the Duke of Teck.

On the rising of the curtain the customary scene presents itself. An Eastern marketplace with a blue sky above, and a large number of shapely damsels engaged in singing a chorus borrowed from an *opera bouffe*. They were further employed in maintaining graceful poses, and in gazing with curiosity through the first and second rows of the stalls. Their undraped figures seemed to awaken some faint emotions in the young stock-brokers and patricians, towards whom their glances were chiefly directed. The movements of their arms and legs, encased in silken tights, were followed with mute approval, and the lack lustre eyes of adolescent *roués* brightened, dwelling upon exposed bosoms, rendered more prominent and alluring by the pressure of the concealed corset.

‘They give you a good deal for the

money,' said the gallery costermonger to his mate.

'Wonder they don't call it the Nudity Theatre,' observed Mr Magee to the occupant of the next stall.

Both these critics apparently adopted the same view of the exhibition.

Four chorus girls more shapely, more generously exposed, and more bejewelled than their sisters then came upon the stage. These ladies said nothing. They bowed to their companions and joined in the chorus. Yet their entrance was the signal for a round of applause from the better part of the house. One man at the back of the pit yelled 'Bravo,' a demonstration resented by the other occupants of that space, for the pit does not like and cannot understand these marked preferences for good looking young women who can neither act, sing, nor dance. The demonstrative man at the back of the pit was none other than Jim Gates, and it will be guessed that one of the four histrionic

nobodies, who elicited the enthusiasm of the stalls was Baby Parsons. She was, however, unaware of the commendatory efforts of her more humble acquaintances, her eyes and smiles—a beautiful battery—being directed full upon a stage box, the occupant of which was hidden by curtains from the vulgar gaze.

The preliminary genuflexions of these ornaments of the theatrical profession being ended, there bounded on the stage an actress whose appearance caused a burst of applause which was universal and genuine, and which threatened to last forever. This enthusiasm was not checked by the pit. They aided and abetted the public in other parts of the house, clapping till their hands were sore and shouting till hoarseness supervened, as their favourite Miss Frampton stood bowing and smiling before them and wondering when they would permit her to go on with the business. From the moment of her entrance there was no more doubt as to the success of the new venture. Her

movements were grace itself. Her points all told. Her humour was contagious, her animal spirits carried all before her. Not that I should willingly ignore the efforts of the four or five competent comedians who supported her. But it was *her* vivacious genius that secured the victory over forced puns, Cockney jingles, topical allusions, and the thousand-and-one other horrors of the modern burlesque.

Dick, from his stall noting these things began to reflect that his importance as a writer for the stage was not so considerable as he had been at first inclined to imagine. Having attended several rehearsals he could see that Brown's words were sometimes altered by the performers, sometimes omitted altogether, and that sometimes entirely new if not original gags were introduced by the low-comedian. Indeed he was further constrained to admit that these interpolated *mots* were received with even greater favour than Brown's most elaborate witticisms — the

audience probably greeting them as old friends. In this entertainment the author was but a secondary personage. The audience was led enchanted by the inimitable fooling of Miss Frampton, by the lights, the movements, the groupings, the richness of colour, the rows of pretty faces, the gleam of white breasts.

My hero—not that Dick aspired to any heroic qualities—was thus engaged in pondering when he perceived Brown at the curtain that covered the stall entrance beckoning to him. Dick took up his gibus, and joined his friend. The author of the burlesque was not a bad fellow. He had taken to Dick. He had found him clever—fresh in his ideas, apt to appreciate a suggestion; moreover he had, with a modesty which touched the elder man, made certain suggestions of his own which were not without value. When they had reached the corridor the author of the burlesque said—

‘It’s a great go, Hook.’

Dick expressed his delight.

‘And now,’ went on Brown, ‘I want you to do me a favour.’

‘Name it,’ said Dick.

‘It’s this,’ answered Brown, taking Dick’s arm and leading him in the direction of the saloon. ‘Lord Rugby insists on Morris putting up a new comedietta with a speaking part for Baby Parsons. It’s to be played before the burlesque.’

‘But she can’t act a little bit,’ objected Dick.

‘That can’t be helped. She must be taught. Rugby pays three hundred pounds for his box for the season, and must be consulted. They’ve asked me to supply them with the play. I have, however, three pantomimes to prepare before Christmas; so the thing’s impossible.’

‘But’—

‘But we want no buts,’ interrupted Brown good humouredly, ‘I have the greatest confidence in you. I’ll give you one or two

sketches of plot, and what assistance I can. You will write the dialogue and work up the characters. Come, now, and I'll introduce you to Rugby.'

Although Dick had expressed some hesitation in undertaking the commission, he was inwardly elated. And Brown who was wise in his generation and never gave any work to his professional brethren of the Otway, was pleased to find a youngster full of original ideas, a vein of humour, and a mastery of idiomatic English, in whom he could place implicit reliance.

Dick made no further demur, and the pair went round to his lordship's box. Baby Parsons at that moment happened to be absent from the stage so that Lord Rugby had leisure to speak a word or two with his visitors. The words spoken were by no means worth the ink and paper that would have to be expended in recording them. His lordship was a young man with a round red face and a thin yellow moustache—altogether

a butchery sort of looking nobleman. With some little difficulty it was explained to him—for he was slow in comprehending things—that Hook had been deputed to write the comedietta in which the inimitable Parsons was to sustain a *rôle*. He expressed an innocent hope that his *protégé* would have a ‘Rattlin’ good part,’ under which circumstances he felt sure she would ‘cut out that sneerin’ little beast, Dolly Dalton.’

He had just conveyed his ideas on this important matter, and Brown was on the point of re-assuring him when the object of his solicitude came upon the stage again. Rugby made an appealing gesture to his visitors for undivided attention. Then taking no more notice of them than if they had been box-keepers, he leaned his heavy head on his fat hands and placing his elbows on the cushioned ledge in front of him, gazed down in wrapt admiration on the charms of his half-naked inamorata. Brown took the hint, and, with-

out saying good-night, left the box followed by his friend.

‘Now that we are here I should like to present you to Mrs Fleming. Excellent woman—goes in for the revival of the ancient glories of the British Drama—and that sort of thing. Beautiful too, and in the prime of life. And what is still more extraordinary, though separated from her husband, of a virtue most impregnable.’

Richard Hook had heard a good deal about this ambitious lessee and followed his guide to her box which was the next but one to that of the enamoured Rugby. In answer to Brown’s knock a rich sweet voice said, ‘Come in.’

There were two ladies within. The one to whom Richard was first introduced was a lady of singular beauty, about thirty-six or thirty-seven years of age. Her figure was ample without coarseness, her skin surpassingly fair, and her expression dignified but kindly. Her hair was brown and wavy,

and her voice, of unusual sweetness, was exquisitely modulated. Her companion was the celebrated Mrs S——, an actress who had in her time undertaken with a success which is part of the history of the theatre those characters in comedy, which Mrs Fleming had since essayed.

It was evident from the position in which the ladies sat that they had not been paying any great attention to the progress of affairs on the stage. Indeed they had been discussing together the degradation of that institution, and had been dealing in terms of strong condemnation with the entertainment then in progress. Dick's frank, easy manner speedily commended him to the ladies, and he had the pleasure of hearing them praise the first of his songs—though the sensitive young versifier himself had shuddered as he heard his lines transposed and altered.

'I congratulate you, Mr Hook,' said Mrs Fleming. 'The lines are very rhythmical and pointed.'

‘I am happy to think,’ replied Dick, bowing, ‘that my first success, however insignificant, should have been made in your theatre.’

Brown, having introduced his friend, had withdrawn, and Mrs Fleming replied to the compliment. Then she went on,

‘After this week the theatre will be no longer mine. I would not have my name even remotely connected with such an exhibition as that.’ She waved her fan in the direction of the stage. ‘No; Morris has made an offer for the lease, and Morris shall have it.’

The celebrated Mrs S. shrugged her shoulders in a rather theatrical way, and added—

‘Morris is a bad man. An ’Ebrew Jew. D’ye know, Eunice,’ for so she addressed her friend, ‘I don’t think Shakspeare could have had much experience of Jews.’

Mrs Fleming arched her eyebrows, and asked—

‘In the name of all the commentators, why?’

‘Because, if he had, he would have made Shylock bargain for a pound-*and-a-half* of flesh.’

Dick was about to take his leave, when Mrs Fleming said in her most gracious and winning way—

‘I receive on Sunday afternoons, Mr Hook, and shall be extremely glad to see you. Mr Brown has informed me that you belong to the Otway. I shall send a card for you there.’

Dick expressed his gratitude. There was something about the woman that fascinated him. A subtle music in the voice that stirred his happiest memories.

‘Some people honour my little receptions, whom I am sure you will be glad to know. Poets, painters, and actors. You will not disappoint me.’

‘The disappointment would be all mine,’ answered Dick, gravely bidding the ladies ‘au revoir.’

He returned to his stall to see the *extravaganza* out, heard two of his songs encored, watched the final grouping of the characters, and saw the curtain descend upon a flood of light and confused gorgeous colours. Saw it rise again as bouquets were thrown from convenient places. One prodigious floral offering being ejected with faulty aim from Lord Rugby's box, fell, not before Baby Parsons, but at the feet of Dolly Dalton, whom his lordship had described as a 'sneerin' little beast.' Miss Dalton clasped the tribute to her heart, and bowed with extreme gratitude in the direction of the patrician's box; and then the curtain fell once more.

Dick declined an invitation conveyed to him by Brown, to sup with Morris and a select number of the company. He hurried from the theatre in a whirl of excitement, went straight to his rooms, and sat down to write a letter to Ruth.

Alas! how little did thoughts of that sweet angel harmonise with memories of the scene he had just quitted.

CHAPTER VIII

THE STREET THAT IS CALLED FLEET

ESSAYISTS, with a turn for humorous or satirical nomenclature, have from time to time invented various names for the street yclept Fleet. One professional wag has transferred to it the name of Grub Street. And an accomplished journalist of our own time has called it Brain Street. This latter appellation is scarcely felicitous, as the name would be equally applicable—more applicable indeed — to Whitehall, or Pall Mall, or Thorgmorton Street. It is certainly not the

street called Straight — in the scriptural spelling of that adjective. I have heard the thoroughfare irreverently described as Grog Street. While a confirmed cynic has called it after an Unmentionable Abode, on account of the good intentions with which it is paved, and the bad spirits to be encountered within its area.

I would name the interesting thoroughfare after the Maelstrom. It draws all manner of poor human craft within its influence. Some of these vessels are laden with golden grain of natural faculties, sound acquirements, brilliant accomplishments. Their sails have been filled with the winds of hope and ambition. But their charts have been unreliable, and the hand that guided the rudder unaccustomed. They are gradually drawn within the sway of the hissing whirlpool, and are sucked down to horrid death beneath the unrelenting waters.

How many have I seen, in my time, dragged within the fatal circle, unconscious

of the danger, laughing, perhaps, as they whirled round and round, till, drawn to the very jaws of destruction, they have disappeared, with ineffectual hands stretched out, and pitiful, appealing eyes turned towards the heavens of brass.

In Maelstrom Street, indeed, fame and fortune are made every week. But here also is ambition crushed, the finer nature contaminated, the soul extinguished in the blackness of darkness. In this populous arena, as in others, the weakest must go to the wall. But while we accord our plaudits to the successful man, shall there be no pity for that vanquished who has bit the dust? No. This is no place for him. Nor, with the huzzas of the multitude in our ears, is this a fitting time. Carry his carcass to the jackals. There are numbers of those beasts of prey in the vicinity.

Shall I show you one of the victims of Maelstrom Street? Follow me. It is early morning. The rising sun has touched with

gold the graceful spire of St Bride's, and the golden cross above the dome of the Cathedral glitters in the keen air. The street is full of the rattle of vans and waggons, and the shouts — not always carrying politely worded intimations — of drivers. Men and boys rush through wide-open doors, bearing heavy burdens of paper, which are piled upon the vans. In a word, the newspaper offices are in the throes of publication, and these heated and impatient disseminators of strange oaths are about to convey the daily broad-sheets to distant suburbs or adjacent railway stations.

Leaving the main thoroughfare we pass into a narrow lane, where the echoes are awakened by the shrill voice of the early milk-maid. Taking a narrow dark passage to the right, we come upon swing doors, through which the yellow gas yet flares, and we enter a reeking pot house. It is a tavern endowed by an intelligent

magistracy with an all-night license, in order that compositors, printers' devils, and men in the machine-room may not die of thirst during their exhausting labours. But he is neither compositor, nor printer's devil, nor man from the machine-room, who snores in the corner there, a broken pipe lying on the sawdust in front of him, and an unfinished pot of stout on the bench beside him.

He is not thirty years of age, but the face, for all its traces of refinement, shows the ineffable marks of dissipation and decay. His linen is soiled, his finger-nails black, his clothes foul from frequent contact with the atmosphere which is breathed in this chapel-of-ease of Bacchus. Who is this human wreck who has succumbed to the sleep of inebriety just at the time when all nature is awakening? That man, I tell you, is of gentle birth. His college career was distinguished. He spoke well, and often at the Union. His contemporaries looked up to him, and regarded him as one likely to

make a name. And this helpless sot is the fruition of that happy promise. Listen to his heavy breathing. Undo his collar for God sake, or the man will choke !

For a time the brilliant University man contributed those leaders of opinion which are now being driven from the adjoining thoroughfare. But the brain has become soddened and inoperative ; the palsied hand has lost its cunning ; he can earn a casual crust ; he can sleep in a kennel. So he lives on. And he has a mother, mind you, has this wreck. She is proud of her boy's intellect. She bewails his poverty and is grieved that the *res angusta domi* prevent her from more frequently sending him remittances. Her maternal instinct, too, tells her of his temptations. She surmises vaguely that his powers of resistance are not considerable. She has a vision at times, impalpable and awful, of the demon that has destroyed his will and devours his young vitals. And while he, dirty and uncon-

scious, slumbers before the bar of a printer's pothouse, she is awake through the night-watches imploring God in agonised silence to spare and protect her offspring.

“O, Iago, the pity of it.”

When finally the light goes out there is but little real sympathy among the survivors. And the crowd at a graveside will be in proportion to the deceased brother's balance at his bankers. The *camaraderie* of Maelstrom Street is a pleasant fiction—which truly the present chapter of this story is *not*. Men who have thriven on the brains of the dear brother departed, and who, while he was alive, would not give a sovereign to keep his body and soul together, now praise his virtues and subscribe a five pound note towards the decent bestowal of his body—his widow and orphans being left to the care of Him who is reputed to hear the young ravens when they cry.

‘Dead! you don’t say so. Poor Tom.

I'm awfully sorry. Too much booze, I fear. Will you drink anything ?'

Or,

'Subscribe to the widow? My dear fellow, I never even *saw* her. And as to Jack—here's to his memory, poor old chap!—we were never what you'd call *very* great friends. But if half-a-crown—eh?'

With these tags the drama of life ends for Tom and Jack, 'poor chaps.' And the wheels in the printing offices go round, and grimy faces move about in the machine-rooms, and the carts and vans rattle over the stones with brilliant articles printed from copy produced by other hands.

The name of the public-house which we just visited—for the atmosphere is stifling and we must go—is the 'Gahenna.' It is the receptacle of dead brains. And to a man of moderately strong nerves it is quite interesting sometimes to listen in such resorts to ghosts of defunct intellects, gibbering to each other and conversing in hollow tones

of old grievances and old triumphs ; of the failures, and successes, and debauches of a former state.

Towards these pleasure houses of the soul Jim Gates gravitated as to his native element. And because he was not overburdened with refinement he seemed to flourish in them, and thrive in their fetid atmosphere. Even had the *Tipster*, with which, when last we saw him he was connected, not posed as the avowed advocate of drunkenness and other vulgar vices, he would still have found his way to the Fleet Street taverns, for besides being patronised by the shades of departed intellect, they were resorted too by touts, small bookmakers, turf prophets, and other shameless and nameless rascals, who make a disreputable livelihood out of the gullibility of the British public—a British public which never exhibits such phenomenal folly as when it attempts to make a fortune by backing horses.

At a table in the back room of a Fleet Street hostelry one afternoon sat Jim Gates. Opposite to him was seated Mark Westaway. Time had told on the high-spirited old sportsman. He had become more florid, his nose was ruddy and swollen, his shoulders were bent, and his apparel by no means so indicative of the country squire as when last we saw him. Mark had deteriorated. He was speaking in querulous tones to his entertainer.

‘It’s always the old story. But I tell you I haven’t got the money. Is this all you dragged me up to town for?’

‘Not all,’ replied the artful Jim, ‘I hope you will put some of my desire to see you down to the credit of natural affection; and some of it to a wish to take you round to see the sights.’

‘The devil take the sights,’ retorted the ungrateful old man; ‘I’ve seen them all, and I hate them.’

‘You haven’t seen Baby Parsons in the new burlesque?’

‘And I don’t want to see her. I’d ten times rather see her behind a bar.’

‘Well, guv’nor,’ went on Jim, in a disappointed tone, ‘if you won’t talk of pleasure, suppose we get to business. I’ve got a plan to make our fortunes.’

‘Damme! make your own; and leave me to make mine.’

‘I can’t without a little capital,’ replied the ingenious Jim, ‘and you know I’ve left the *Tipster*.’

This was scarcely true. James had been summarily dismissed from that organ. Mr Jacobson had entrusted him with a commission involving money. Now, Jim knew that although the wily Hebrew was sharp enough in other matters, he was a comparative failure in commercial details. He saw that he was systematically robbed by all those who conducted his business, from the publisher of his paper down to the office

boy. Following the example of these reputable persons, James had manipulated the commission and had in consequence been removed from his position.

‘You’re always losing your situations. You’re no better than a rolling stone. But what’s your new scheme?’

‘It’s private tipping, guv’nor. Sending out winners by post to subscribers of a sovereign a week.’

‘D’ye think people are fools?’

‘I do. That’s the principle on which I work,’ replied the candid Jim.

‘But it’s illegal. It’s not respectable,’ objected Mr Westaway, with a somewhat unusual regard for the two virtues indicated.

‘Not a bit. The law says it’s illegal. But the judges have determined that the law doesn’t say what it *does* say. As to its respectability, ‘Old Soil’d Un’ is a tipster. Jacobson himself founded his fortunes in the same way. And the ‘Plunger,’ who ruined himself by following his own advice is now

making his fortune by advising other people. Why, guv'nor, you and I might cut up a thousand a year between us if this thing was properly worked.'

The old man pondered and then asked :

'How much would it take to start the business?'

'I could manage with a tenner. I could manage better with two.'

Mark Westaway resorted to his old querulous tone. He had harboured the notion for a moment and was momentarily elated by the prospect of a certain five hundred a year. He answered :

'I tell you it can't be done. They watch me. Old Sir Penton has been twice over to the farm lately. He puts the girls against me. I can't have a penn'orth of milk but it's noted down in a book—curse them.'

'So say I,' added Jim, devoutly, 'but don't you think that you could manage a transaction where you *wouldn't* be watched? Say what

you like, the farm is yours, and if the worst came to the worst, no law in the world would condemn you for taking what is your own.

The fine old English gentleman finished his brandy-and-water, called for another glass, and seemed more inclined to listen to the voice of reason. Jim was not displeased to find that Mark Westaway's intellect was not so bright as it had been. Indeed, at Wapshot the customers of Mr Parsons whispered that in his cups and out of them, Mark had become very 'strange,' his condition sometimes being that of a simpleton, while at other times he was subject to fits of ungovernable rage.

'Think how small the investment,' said Jim, pursuing the theme, while the mind of the subject was in a state of receptivity.

'Ten pounds ain't small to *me*,' replied the old man.

'And how large and how certain the returns,' went on Jim, not heeding the objection.

‘How do *I* know they’re large and certain?’ inquired Mark, sharply, and with an expression of feeble cunning.

‘I’ll show it to you in black and white,’ said Jim, producing a pencil and an envelope, which he placed with the unused side up.

‘No, for heaven’s sake, *don’t!*’ exclaimed Mark, in accents of genuine distress, and placing his hand to his head, ‘figures puzzle me now. It’s nothing but figures, figures, from morning till night at the farm. I’m blest if those gals of mine won’t show you that the farm’s in a state of the greatest prosperity, by figures, when I know it’s going to the dogs. Hang all figures, say I.’

It might be dangerous to insist for the present in arithmetical demonstration. So Jim changed the subject by inquiring :

‘And how *are* all the people at Wapshot?’

‘All against me, Jim, all against me. Sir Penton, the Vicar, Gilliat, even that scoundrel Hoppy—all take part against me, a man that once held his head as high as the best

of them. There's some jolly fellows come of a night to the 'Three Feathers,' And I still take the chair at the Saturday Sing-Song. But the 'Feathers' isn't the place it was since Polly went. Egad, they got it about that you were going to marry her when you and she went off together, you dog.'

'Is it likely I should so far forget myself?' asked the philosopher of the stews.

'That's what I told 'em,' said the old man, with animation—'Begad, says I, Jim is a gentleman and the son of a gentleman. He may have gone off with her, but, by the Lord, he'll never marry her.'

'I am happy to be a credit to those who take an interest in principles which I inherit,' answered Jim, with a bow. 'But just think, sir, what it would be to get away from the captious gossips of Wapshot, the petty annoyances of an ungrateful progeny, the patronising interference of a stuck-up mushroom of a baronet. By means of my scheme

you could live in town, have the best to eat and drink, join a club, and ride in the Park on your own hack.'

The prospect was by no means displeasing to this game old sportsman. And in the fumes of the brandy-and-water his doubts and difficulties as to the means of obtaining the capital partly disappeared. Though as yet no *modus operandi* had formed itself in a mind muddled by excessive refreshment, he extended his hand to his companion and said with evident emotion—

'Damn it all, Jim, blood's thicker than water. And I'll have a *try*. I don't promise, mind. But I'll have a go at it. And now,' he continued after he had finished his last glass, 'you may take me to see a sight or two if you like—for I must get back this evening.'

Pleased with the success of his interview, Jim dutifully led the Guv'nor into the outer air.

CHAPTER IX

A PRIVATE REHEARSAL

MORE than a week had elapsed since the successful inauguration of the new season at the Oddity. Standing in the Otway with his back to the fire, Magee was entertaining a select circle of early-afternooners, who sat grouped about him, with an account of his recent candidature for an Irish County. The fatal fight between two rival brass bands; the abduction of his opponent's election agents; and of his own miraculous escape over the roofs of houses, and his subsequent escape to Eng-

land in the hold of a cattle steamer : these stirring incidents on flood and field were related with such inimitable drollery, such humorous exaggeration, and in such a racy brogue, that his more phlegmatic auditors fairly roared with merriment. Brown, who was of the group, was particularly demonstrative in his cachinnation, for Brown knew the value of conciliating this hair-brained Hibernian.

Magee's narrative had come to an end, and the listeners were discussing its points among themselves, when Richard Hook entered the room. He approached the raconteur, and, grasping him warmly by the hand, said—

‘You're very good, Magee, and I'm very grateful.’

‘Thunder an' turf! man alive, and what is it you're grateful for?’

‘For your awfully nice notice of my little songs.’

‘Pooh! pooh!’ replied the other. ‘I've

been paid for that in coin. You mus'n't pay me over again in kind.'

Indeed, Dick had been greatly pleased, and touched by the few lines of elegant encomium, which Magee had introduced into his notice of the burlesque. The notice appearing in a great and influential paper, would, he thought, counteract the effect of the gratuitous sneers of the organ of touts, tipsters, and toadies.

'Oh, the selfishness and vanity of you young authors,' continued Magee, meditatively. 'Now, I'll be bound you've got that notice of your powers off be heart, and didn't read a word of my scathing leader on Lord Ballymacarret's mission that appeared in the very same issue.'

'Indeed,' replied Dick, warmly, 'I read every word of it. And as Lord Ballymacarret is a friend of mine you may imagine how gratified I must have been.'

'A friend—is he?' said the journalist with an almost boyish glee. 'Then you understand

his temper. Won't that same article make him squirm? Does he swear at all? Tell me that, ma bouchal—does he *swear*?'

'I have never heard him blaspheme,' answered Dick, smiling, 'but if he has any constitutional tendency that way I'm perfectly certain that leader must have brought on a severe fit of it.'

'It was a scorcher an' no mistake,' continued Magee with increasing delight. 'D'ye remimber how I ended? I said—"A political pigmy, Lord Ballymacarret is harmless in the House. A discredited diplomatist despatched on a delicate and difficult mission, he is a danger to the Empire!" Had him there, me boy. Tell me, d'ye know Lord Hampton?'

'I met him once.'

'Engaged to the political pigmy's daughter, isn't he.'

'To his niece. At least, so I believe.'

'That's the way. Nothing but nepotism and corrupt influence in political life!

Hampton went out with the discredited diplomatist? And now, I hear they're going to give him an Embassy. That's only a step to the Cabinet,—you mark my words. Bedad, I've got as much politics in my little finger as they have in both their bodies. An' d'ye think they'd give *me* an Embassy? Or offer *me* a sate in the Cab'net? Divvle a bit of it, me boy. But there's Brown beck'nin' t'ye. So be off.'

As Dick withdrew to consult with the burlesque writer, Magee's group once more closed round him to listen to the story of his adventures or hear his apocryphal anecdotes concerning men and women of the day.

'I've read the comedietta,' said Brown, when he and Dick were out of hearing. 'It'll *do*.'

This was high praise from such an authority, and Dick expressed the gratification that the intelligence afforded him.

'It wants brightening up here and there, a considerable lot of cutting down, and the

introduction of more business. But the characters are decidedly fresh, and the dialogue brisk and pungent. As I said, it'll *do if*'——

'If what?' inquired Dick, alarmed, for the author had paused ominously.

'If Baby Parsons can be taught her part,' replied Brown.

'And can she not be taught?' inquired Dick. 'Is she so very stupid?'

'As stupid as an owl, as dull as an oyster; for mere histrionic ability she is below the level of a Barbary ape.'

This was discouraging, and Dick said so in despondent tones.

'She plays the principal part too! How provoking!'

'It is provoking,' acquiesced Brown; 'but if you think of writing for the theatre you must accustom yourself to provocation. I have, however, a suggestion to make to you with regard to Miss Parsons.'

'What is that?' asked Dick, anxiously.

‘If she were taken in hand by some one who was patient and sympathetic—some one who had an interest in the work—she might be trained up to a respectable rendering of the character. She has that imitative faculty which we find among some of the lower animals.’

‘And who can we get to do all this,’ inquired the innocent Dick.

‘*You,*’ replied Brown, ‘you are the person most deeply interested in the success of the work. You are young, you are an excellent elocutionist, and I am sure you would be patient and sympathetic.’

This was not pleasant intelligence to Master Dick. In the theatre he had avoided Miss Parsons as much as possible. He still regarded her as the village hoyden, the tapster’s daughter, drawing beer for ploughmen and waggoners. He was apt to overlook the fact that she had been ‘translated.’ He did not, however, mention these objections to Brown.

‘You would be more at your ease in her own house. I suggest that your instruction should commence there.’

‘But Lord Rugby?’ objected Dick.

‘Anticipating your consent, I took the liberty of mentioning the matter last night. Rugby’s delighted. Would be charmed with anything calculated to advance the theatrical interests of the fair artiste. Between ourselves, I think he contemplates taking a theatre for her. From that point of view the connection should be desirable to an author.’

This last consideration decided Dick.

‘When shall we go?’ he asked.

‘Now. My brougham is at the door.’

Baby Parsons occupied a villa near the Regent’s Park. It was surrounded by high walls, between which and the house were gardens, admirably kept, but at the time of year when Mr Hook saw them by no means in their glory. Brown and his friend were shown by the servant into a drawing-room,

somewhat over-furnished with ottomans, settees, and chairs in red satin. The carpets were soft and heavy. Mats, rugs, and skins were littered about in great profusion. Cabinets were full of china—old and new. An ormolu clock ticked on the mantelpiece, which was covered with thick red velvet. And on a table in the corner were an empty champagne bottle and a box of cigarettes. Had Polly been the wife of the most respectable tradesman in all Camberwell, she could not have succeeded in furnishing her drawing-room with a more assertive vulgarity.

Baby Parsons—or Mrs Parsons, as she was called in this domestic paradise, such being the sacrifice which ladies in her position make to the proprieties—soon entered the room. She made her guests welcome with an easy Bohemianism, which she no doubt considered the very height of good breeding. She wore a white morning robe, a few silver bangles, and a solitary diamond ring. The two red patches, which adorned the soft

eminence of her cheek bones caused her face to appear pallid and her eyes dark and cavernous. There was about her that *cachet* of her order which the *jeunesse dorée* of this part of the century find so attractive.

She had a latent dislike for Brown. For at rehearsal Brown was a martinet, and had unsparingly pointed out her deficiencies. But to give her every credit, she had a good heart, and did not permit her dislike to be apparent. Brown, on his side, treated her much as he would have treated an overgrown child.

‘Now, Baby, my dear, Mr Hook has come to read his play to you. Attend to what he says, and I shouldn’t be surprised if you turned out a sort of second Ellen Terry, some of these days. Good-bye for the present.’

So saying, Brown took his departure, and left together pupil and teacher—the rising dramatist, the coming comedienne. There was some little awkwardness, at first, on both sides. Polly felt quite at ease with the

masters of music and French and deportment with whose services the liberality of Lord Rugby provided her. But this was different. Memories of the old home—such as it was—were upon her. She was nervous, and, what was worse, she showed it. Then she did what was perhaps the best, certainly the most usual, thing to do. She rang the bell, and ordered a bottle of champagne.

Dick had made up his mind to indulge in no allusions to Wapshot and having tasted the wine which had been handed to him—Baby had swallowed a bumper—announced himself ready to read his play. Polly Parsons leaned back in an easy chair—her feet and ankles of which she was justly proud, being extended for the benefit of her instructor. He was, however, apparently blind to these pedal perfections encased in dainty satin slippers, and stockings of ruby silk. After what lecturers call ‘a few preliminary observations’ on the nature, scope, and the intention of the comedietta he commenced to read.

Occasionally he looked up. She sat opposite to him as statuesque and impassive as the bronze Venus of Milo at his side. He asked questions as to proposed alterations in the dialogue. But no gleam of intelligence showed that she had followed the development of the plot. However, he went manfully through with the task of reading, and, when he had concluded he asked politely how she liked her part.

‘Which is my part?’ she asked vacantly.

Dick bit his lip with vexation, but representing all signs of annoyance, again informed her of the name and nature of the character which she was to enact.

‘Oh! I think it’s jolly, and won’t it make Sissy Somerset mad to see me with a part?’ she asked innocently.

The author who felt no sympathy with the proposed humiliation of Sissy—with whom indeed he was not even acquainted—now recollected what Brown had told him about the imitative faculty.

‘Now, then, Miss Parsons’——

‘Please, Mr Hook, don’t call me *that*. Call me Polly as—as they used to do at Wapshot.’

‘Well, then, Polly,’ went on Dick in a most business like way and with no desire to revert to home topics, ‘will you be good enough to repeat some of the lines after me.’

‘I must have another glass of wine first,’ hesitated Polly.

‘Pardon my negligence,’ said Dick, with as grave an air as though he were speaking to a duchess. Then he filled her glass and put the bottle down.

‘Won’t *you* have another glass?’ asked the hospitable Polly.

‘Thanks, not at present. Will you be so good as to repeat after me the dialogue where you are accused by Lady Soapsuds of being in love with Jack Fizzle.’

Polly settled herself into an attitude denoting attention.

‘Now say——“*Love him! Why, I hate him.*”’

‘Love ’im, why I ’ate ’im,’ said Polly, all

in one breath, without accent, and in three instances without aspirate.

While Dick was with exemplary patience and fortitude rehearsing this sentence and pointing out to the actress the vast difference in meaning which might be occasioned by the omission of an aspirate, there was a ring at the front door and an altercation was immediately afterwards heard in the hall. The drawing-room in which they were seated was close to the door and the voices were quite audible. Polly grew perceptibly paler as she heard them.

‘Missis is not at ’ome,’ said the voice of a menial.

‘I tell you she *is*,’ replied the voice of a man.

‘His lordship’s with her,’ objected the menial.

‘You lie,’ brutally retorted the man, ‘I saw him half-an-hour ago go into the ‘Raleigh.’

Then there was a scuffle. Then the handle

of the door turned, the door flew open with a bang, and Jim Gates entered the room. Polly rose trembling and excited. As Jim caught sight of Dick Hook he looked for the moment surprised and crestfallen. To do him credit, however, he soon regained his accustomed swagger, and without affecting to notice Baby Parsons' visitor, said,

'Polly, I want to see you alone—on business.'

'I can't,' replied the girl, evidently in terror. 'I'm engaged—on business. And you mustn't come here. I've told you, you mustn't come here.'

'Oh! but I *shall* come here. And now I *am* here I intend to stop.'

It was Dick's turn to speak.

'You have heard what this lady has said. She wishes you to go.'

'Oh, that be blowed,' said the other, with an easy air of proprietorship.

'Hark ye, Mr Gates,' went on Dick, rising. 'We have met once before. Your memory

will perhaps teach you to think better of your determination. I ask you now quietly to retire. I shall not ask you a third time.'

Jim, who was about the most arrant coward that ever swindled for a living, thought perhaps that discretion was the better part of valour, and putting on an air of bravado, said,

'Well, two's company and three's none. Next time I'll select my hour better, Polly. As for you, Mr Hook, don't imagine I'm going because of your threat. I've an account to settle with you—and settled it will be one of these days. Ta-ta, Polly, dear.'

So saying, he swaggered out of the room, banged the door behind him, let himself out at the hall door, banged that also with vindictive violence, and strode home feeling that he was an aggrieved and injured man.

Meanwhile Polly had thrown herself on an ottoman, in most admired disorder and was sobbing hysterically. It would be worse

than useless to continue the reading of the comedietta on that occasion. It would be less than human, however, to leave her in this distress, so Dick went over, touched her on the shoulder, and said,

‘There, Polly, don’t cry. You shan’t have any more of the comedietta to-day. So cheer up. And in future, to avoid interruptions of the kind, you shall come to *my* rooms to rehearse.’

‘Oh, thank you so much,’ she sobbed, ‘it’s so stupid of me. But Jim’s so cruel. And oh! he do follow me about so.’

Dick suggested another glass of wine. The prescription had an immediate effect on the lady’s spirits. She proceeded with more animation and with fewer sobs.

‘And Ruggy,’ for that was the pet name for the youthful patrician who took such a lively interest in her dramatic success, ‘Ruggy is so jealous.’

‘Is he, though?’ said Dick.

‘He is, indeed; and for all that Jim is

always turning up at places where you'd never expect he knew we were. And then Ruggy's so cross with *me*, as if *I* could help it.'

'Of course not,' said Dick. He must say something.

'Do you know what Ruggy has nicknamed him?'

'Can't think.'

'He calls him "Hawkshaw the Detective."' As she said this, she smiled through her tears, and the storm was for the present past.

'Capital,' said Dick, 'I had no idea that his lordship was a wit.'

'Oh! he's *immensely* clever,' said Polly, nodding her head, and speaking with an air of earnest conviction.

'Then,' added Dick, 'you ought to get Ruggy, as you call him, to write your plays. He would have more judgment, and more favourable opportunities of rehearsing them. I will fix a time and place for our next reading and let you know. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye,' she said softly; but she held

his hand a little longer than was necessary, and looked in his face ; and at that moment her thoughts went back to waving corn in the meadows, the tinkle of the sheep-bell in the pastures, the broad sweep of the Thames, under the willows.

The feeling, however, is but transient. To-night she will laugh at the anecdotal autobiographies of her companions of the *coulisses* ; contribute stimulating episodes from the story of her own little amours, and unblushing and unabashed, exchange the highly charged slang of the dressing-rooms.

CHAPTER X

UPPER BOHEMIA

SINCE he had been commissioned to write a comedietta, Dick had not looked into a law-book. Nay, more—he had abandoned the Temple altogether, notwithstanding its glimpses of the Thames, the Leviathan barges with their brown sails, and the penny steamers with their unlovely burdens. He had removed his furniture to newly-erected chambers in Jerymn Street, and had sub-let his rooms in the Temple—library and all—to a more earnest neophyte. No

palliation that I wot of can be offered for this serious step. It may be urged that he was young ; that he was easily swayed ; that he had a sufficient income and could please himself. Moreover, had he not, at the very threshold of his town career, been elected to that small band of mortals who produce works for the stage ? From the correspondence columns of the *Era*, he learned that many gifted persons spent a life-time in writing plays, and despatching them to managers without achieving a tittle of even his easily-earned success.

These, I candidly admit, are quite insufficient as reasons for adopting so grave a step as that of abandoning a learned profession. Just as every private is said to carry a Field Marshal's baton in his knapsack, so every member of the Junior Bar may be described as having the Lord High Chancellor's seal in his wig box. And to be Lord Chancellor is surely a more respectable thing than to supply dialogue and situations

to mummers who, by act of parliament are styled rogues and vagabonds. 'Tis useless to argue the point. We must merely accept the fact. Acknowledging, perhaps, that the current of Dick's ambition never set very strongly in the direction of legal preferment.

On a dreary October Sunday evening, at about five o'clock, Dick left his new chambers, called a cab, and was whirled away to an address in Kensington. It was that of Mrs Fleming. His short interview had compelled his interest in that lady. Besides, Brown had privately admonished him to 'keep in' with her. And Magee, who was one of her most devoted admirers, had said fervently—

'Go, by all means. You'll meet no end of lithery swells there—including meself, most likely.'

The cab pulled up before an old-fashioned, red-brick house, with a wide portico, and a carved oak door. An awning was spread

above the short path that led from the garden-gate to the entrance of the house. The door was opened by a servant in a plain livery. The wide hall was oak-panelled, and the ceiling was of the same wood. The door of the dining-room was open. Dick glanced in as he passed. The ceiling of this room was also of oak. And the walls were covered with oil paintings, some of them, as he afterwards ascertained, of great value. A table was laid, on which were spread such carved delicacies as are included in the uncomplimentary epithet of 'snacks.' And the many lights from the candelabra shone on decanters with contents of liquid gold or ruby. On a smaller table, beyond the massive side-board—also of course, in oak—stood a 'neat-handed Phyllis,' in white cap and apron, dispensing tea and coffee. Two or three gentlemen were helping themselves, in respectful silence, to samples of the delicacies before them. And, as Dick was in the act of passing the door, the menial, who had

admitted him, inquired whether he also would partake of refreshments. He, however, desired to be conducted to his hostess, and was directed to proceed up the broad staircase. On the second landing, another servitor opened the drawing-room door and announced his name.

It was a lofty and spacious apartment, half-filled with persons whom Dick supposed to be the 'literary swells,'—male and female of their kind. The air was full of the hum of conversation. The ladies were for the most part seated, but the men buzzed about like bees from flower to flower. Except in the case of certain couples of male beings, who, selecting corners, argued with a pathetic and despairing earnestness on the 'objective' and the 'subjective;' or prattled artlessly of the pretty theories of such philosophers as Kant or Comte. The room was filled with a soft luxurious light from candles and shaded lamps. No pictures hung on the walls, which were exquisitely painted in

panel. Chairs and lounges, designed to satisfy the eye of the artist and the repose of the indolent, were dotted about in the confusion incident to a migratory mob. And on marble pedestals in the corners of the room and in the window recesses stood bronzes of price.

Dick's eye was not long in detecting the whereabouts of his hostess. Seated on a low fauteuil she was surrounded by three or four of her worshippers. In a black velvet dress, cut square at the neck, a plain gold cross being her only ornament, Dick thought she looked superb—an idea which was not dispelled when he made his way to her. She rose to greet him; expressed herself delighted to see him; hoped for a long talk, and was about to introduce him to some people whom he really ought to know when the servant at the door announced Mr B. Now Mr B. was a great poet, and being accustomed to the ways of the place pushed himself through the

crowd and was paying his respects to Mrs Fleming in less time than it takes me to tell it. Mr B. was a lion. The other admirers appeared to crowd round, and Dick, much to his chagrin, found himself outside the charmed circle—which to a young poet, whose songs were nightly encored at the Oddity, was, to say the least of it, somewhat humiliating.

At that moment, however, he thought he detected in the distance the mellifluous music of Magee's brogue. And, indeed, he saw that undaunted Milesian skipping about from one to another. Now he was discussing the Afghan frontier with a veteran traveller with a bronzed face and one eye. Again he warmly congratulated an eminent novelist on his last production, eulogizing it in terms of the utmost exaggeration. He even entered into the disquisitions on metaphysics with the earnest men in corners, and gave his views on stage

costumes to the actor-manager of the Lugu-breum Theatre.

As Dick passed the various groups in his efforts to capture the only human being—with the exception of his hostess—whom he knew, he could not help hearing some of the conversation that took place around him. He was surprised to find that the names of great authors, whom from his boyhood he had venerated, were held in disesteem. He heard their works of fiction contemptuously dismissed as being 'vulgar, though not devoid of a certain Cockney humour,' and an eminent poet spoken of as a mere popular rhymster, without an indication of the divine afflatus. To compensate for this withdrawal of confidence in authors of note, he was charmed to hear the possession of God-like genius attributed to men and women of whose existence and productions he had up to that time been in profound ignorance. This was all very puzzling to the young aspirant to literary honours.

When within a few yards of the fugitive Magee, he saw that worthy disappear between two heavy curtains which seemed to lead into another apartment. He followed. To his grief, however, his friend was in the act of leading a lady, dressed in what is known as the æsthetic style to the conservatory beyond. The room in which Dick now found himself was smaller, but cooler than the one he had left—the sensation of coolness being increased by the appearance of the great green leaves of the exotics beyond, and gentle plash of the water in the fountain. The same soft, subdued light was shed, and Dick, not wishing immediately to renew his experience of solitude, in a crowd, turned his attention to the walls of the room. These were hung with water-colours, by ‘most approved good masters.’ Two beautifully framed sketches attracted the lonely Dick’s attention. The one was that of a child of about two years—a girl, with clear blue eyes and curly golden hair

—gold that might one day turn to brown. The expression was more than that of childish innocence. It was one of angelic sweetness.

The other portrait was that of a man. He was represented, as was the fashion with artists when depicting sitters possessing an intellectual cast of features, with his head leaning upon his hand, the elbow being supported by a table, on which was also a book, from which the sitter was studiously looking away. The person in the portrait might have been thirty-five when the picture was done. He was decidedly handsome, with a certain high bred and distinguished air, and a somewhat melancholy expression. How long Dick gazed at this likeness he could not tell. He was recalled to himself by the tap of a fan on the shoulder, and, turning suddenly round, found himself face to face with his hostess.

‘So soon a deserter, Mr Hook,’ she said, with a smile that atoned for the rebuke.

Dick stammered out an apology.

‘You have been admiring my pictures, I see.’

‘I have been looking at these two portraits,’ said Dick, indicating those he meant.

‘They are by Poult,’ replied the lady, graciously, ‘and they are excellent examples : few better. Poor Poult ! he cannot paint such things now.’

‘He could seldom have been so happy in his models,’ ventured Dick, at random.

‘Think so ?’ said the lady, quietly. ‘Let us sit here for a moment,’ and she pointed with her fan to an ottoman.

‘Yes,’ replied Dick, ‘the face of the gentleman is one which many would describe by that inapt adjective “interesting.” But it is more. It is an intellectual face, and yet seems to breathe such melancholy. May I ask, Mrs Fleming, was the original a celebrated man ?’

‘He *might* have been. He was my husband.’

Dick bowed in sympathy, and said simply,

‘Pardon me. I did not know.’

‘And I fancy your surmise now is wrong. You suppose me to be a widow. My husband is still alive.’

Dick did not know exactly what to say, so he adopted the only wise course under such circumstances. He said nothing.

‘There are separations other than death and worse than it,’ went on Mrs Fleming, turning her head away as if to hide the expression of any emotion which might have appeared on her beautiful face. Regaining her composure in a moment she turned once more towards her guest and said, gaily,

‘But I certainly did not seek you out to discuss gloomy subjects with you. Your home, I am told, is at Wapshot. A pretty place, I believe.’

‘I think it is the prettiest place in the world,’ replied Dick, enthusiastically.

‘No stinted praise, Mr Hook,’ said the lady, with a smile, ‘and you prove your

devotion, I suppose, by settling amid the dust and smoke and din of London.'

'One cannot live always in the country—not even though it be Wapshot,' answered Dick.

'True. There is I suppose very little society there?' she inquired, carelessly.

'Next to none,' replied Dick. 'There are our people, and there's dear old O'Lympus the Vicar, and there's General Featherston, but he's two miles off, and'——

'Yes; and who else?'

'Well, there's a Mr Gilliat.'

'Curious name. He's the banker, I suppose?'

'No,' said Dick, with hesitancy, 'he's a private gentleman, and very clever. But he is religious and preaches, and—and all that.'

'Quite an interesting character,' said the lady, 'and this Mr—Mr Gilliat--what does his wife say to his preaching? And has he any children?'

‘His wife, I believe, is not living. He has one child—Ruth.’

Dick’s voice sank, and his lip quivered as he pronounced the name. Mrs Fleming was quick to note the signs.

‘And this child—is she pretty?’

‘She is not a child now. She is eighteen. And she is very beautiful.’

You must make some allowance for this young fellow. His youth must plead for him, and the fact that he is talking to a lovely and sympathetic woman old enough to be his own mother. In a moment his reserve had broken down and with flushed cheek, he said, to his hostess—

‘And oh! Mrs Fleming, I love her so. But neither her father nor mine will hear of it, and I am not to go home till I have ceased to think of her and that will be never—never!’

He spoke with great energy and determination. Mrs Fleming had grown unaccountably pale and agitated, and giving

her hand to Dick, in token of sympathy, I suppose, she said, gravely—

‘Be worthy of her, my friend, and true to her. If you *are*, love must win her in the end.’

Dick was touched by the kindness and sincerity of her tone.

‘You are very good,’ was all he could reply.

‘One of these days I hope to prove it,’ she said.

At that moment the voice of Magee, returning from the far end of the conservatory, was heard in loud and animated conversation with the lady whom he had conducted thither.

‘I agree wid you entirely,’ he was saying, with enthusiasm. ‘There is a repose about the sun-flower, an unostentatious dignity, for which we search in vain through the rest of the vegetable kingdom.’

‘I am so glad to hear *you* say so,’ answered the lady, ‘for, as a rule, gentlemen

of the press do not seem quite to appreciate the gods of our worship.'

'Of coorse I'm not a bigot, Miss Grosvenor. There are spots on the sun. An' so I suppose we may allow a few thrifling dhrawbacks in the sun-flower.'

'Indeed!' said the lady, who did not appreciate a half-hearted devotee. 'And what defects has the sun-flower — indeed, what defects can it have?'

'It's so very yallow; and so infurnally full of earwigs,' replied the journalist.

'Your arm, Mr Hook,' said Mrs Fleming, rising as Magee and his fair friend appeared in sight. 'I have been too long absent from my guests.'

Dick rose, offered his arm, parted the heavy curtains, stood back to let the lady precede him, and followed her through the buzz of conversation, the hum of controversy, and the ripple of laughter—which mingled sounds continued until a swift prelude was struck from the piano, and the voice of a

prima donna flooded the room, and caused passers-by to stop and listen in the rain.

* * * * *

‘And what did ye think of it?’ asked Magee, as, at eight o’clock, and in the same cab, they rattled towards the Club and dinner.

‘I am charmed with *her*,’ replied Dick, who saw no sin in confessing a sentiment so natural.

‘That’s more than I am wid the fair partner of me botanical explorations in the conservatory. She wanted to convert me to Buddhism until I showed her I knew more about the “Light of Asia” than she did. Thin she thried to make me believe in green an’ yallow, till I tould her the sun-flower was full of slimy things that crawl wid legs. Flurtation, under thim circumstances, is unsatisfactory, if not impossible. But here we are.’

CHAPTER XI

CHILL OCTOBER

At one time it was a broad and generous reach that stretched in front of Riverdale. But a long continued drought and a disinclination on the part of lock-keepers above to lessen their own supply has sadly changed the aspect of Nature in the neighbourhood of Sir Penton Hook's riparian home. Gray lights and dark October shadows; falling leaves, gathering mists, and a wind sighing among the Autumnal branches — these

portents seem to promise an abundant rain ;
an abundant rain that comes not.

Aits that ere-while were green to their very contact with the lapping water now seem to have been lifted a yard into the air displaying an arid under-zone of hardened mud. Mud-encased rushes shiver on the banks of these dreary desert islands. Upon a deceitful strand of mud three laden barges lie limp and lop-sided—so firmly embedded that it seems unlikely that they shall ever again essay commerce on the highway of the Thames. The sky has taken its colour from the prevailing tint beneath and the very cygnets—now grown to a formidable size and mindful of the severe attentions of the swan-uppers—have turned to mud colour. Dry and disreputable water-flags encased from root to shivering tip with subsided mud bend and rattle ; and dark odours of decaying stalks are gently wafted across the bare fields.

There is a cold glitter in the water from

which the well-furnished skiffs, the striped flannels, and the conspicuous sunshades astern, have long ago disappeared. Sometimes from a rent in the gray rugged mass of barren clouds, a hapless ray of sunshine escapes, touching the ripples beneath. But the ray is cheerless and its effect on the chill wavelets provocative of melancholy. By the margin of the stream grow pollards respectable enough as to their tops, but at the bottom and for a couple of feet above their emergence from the stream, shewing deformed, withered, and fouled by the universal mud. These miserable growths remind one of some unfortunate man, who while preserving his head has suffered paralysis of the lower limbs.

The face of nature presents more tolerable features inland from the river. The eye falls on a screen of Virginia creeper, the tender green of which has departed, leaving foliage of a rich purple, which, turning to copper, drops to the gravel or is whirled away in the October wind. Above the creeper we catch

sight of sloping tiles of a softened red and the blown blue smoke from a farm house chimney. The large leaves of the chestnut trees succumb earliest to the Autumnal touch, the outer edge of the leaf first turning colour till the entire is burnt to copper, and sere and brittle deserts its parent stem and is trodden under foot: or, borne on a kindly wind, falls noiselessly upon the bosom of the Thames.

A narrow lane, with high hedgerows, shows at this time of year to greater advantage than the more ambitious river course or the exposed stretches of pasture land. The leaves of the hedges have turned to old gold, and here and there a bright cluster of scarlet berry flashes through the foliage. The robin, growing bolder with the advance of the season, turns his resplendant vest towards the passer by, while the wren, smaller and more timid, scuttles through impassable interstices beneath, with short sharp nervous note. Beyond the hedge, where a gap obligingly reveals itself, one catches sight of the sheep huddled

beside the hurdles, or the contemplative kine stretched at ease on the sweet pasture, chewing the cud.

Carrie Dunlop and Ruth Gilliat emerging from this lane and coming upon the chill and uninviting flow of the river are conscious of the contrast, and the latter shudders as she gazes on the long stretches of gray mud, the cold ripple, and listens to the sad cadence of the wind.

The flight of time has done much for Ruth. There is still the same beauty of expression, the same delicate perfection of form and feature. But she looks more womanly. Her mouth at times can shape itself to that promise of determination, which characterises her father. Her manner is less timid. The light of hope shines in her eyes. And the sad accent which had been noticeable in her conversation, has given place to a more cheerful note. How much of this is due to the epistolary attention of Dick, and how much to the influence of Miss Dunlop, it would not be easy to

determine. Both no doubt contributed largely to the result. And although at times, and when alone, Ruth was borne down by the guilty knowledge that she was deceiving her father in continuing her correspondence with Dick, she drew comfort from the knowledge that her love itself was pure and unselfish, and that, when in the end that love triumphed the means would have to be condoned as being justified by the end. Love has its own logic.

Upon Mr Gilliat himself the influence of Carrie, if imperceptible, was real enough. She was—much to the chagrin of the redoubtable Sir Penton—a constant visitor at the Priory. She had the tact to affect an interest in the evangelist's theological pursuits, and had, I believe a real sympathy with his philanthropic efforts. And he was not insensible to her quick intuitions when arguing, nor to her practical benevolence when a deserving cause was presented to her. So she gained a footing in the house of this

sad stern man, and even a place in his affections. Her bright brisk manner disarmed him. Gradually and imperceptibly she widened the scope of their discussions. Her relationship to a distinguished politician and her engagement to a man destined to take a high place in the councils of the nation, excused the introduction of political matters. Eventually Mr Gilliat himself broached such pregnant topics, and spoke of them after the manner of one who must at some time have mixed with the world. Since coming to Wapshot he had at election times been canvassed by opposing parties. But he had never voted, avowing that in such affairs he had no interest whatever. Now, however, and to a mere girl, he acknowledged the possession of a political faith, and avowed himself a Conservative.

His old confidence in his daughter had never returned. His eyes followed her fur-
tively as she left the room. He would have read her soul. He had never alluded to the

events of more than a year ago. And if occasionally a doubt crossed his mind as to the state of her affections, he endeavoured to drive it forth as a suggestion of the Evil One, flattering himself that a sense of duty and a gentle sorrow for deceit had driven from her mind the folly of her supposed affection for Sir Penton's son.

In Carrie, however, she found a ready and sympathetic confidante and counsellor. To her she betrayed all her hopes and fears, her faith and her doubts. The woman of the world made plain to her all Dick's sudden belief in the theatre, making Ruth feel quite ashamed of the terror which she had originally manifested when alluding to the playhouse and those who were connected with it. Carrie possessed in an eminent degree the faculty for flushing the horizon of others with the dawn of that hope which illuminated her own. Under her influence Mr Gilliat's nature had thawed, and that of

his daughter had become robust and self-reliant.

These two women—so different in disposition and presenting such a contrast in appearance—stood looking on the insufficient stream and feeling no doubt the influence of that melancholy which its deserted aspect was calculated to impart.

‘Let us return,’ said Ruth, with a slight shiver, ‘I cannot bear the Thames—since—since he went away.’

Carrie smiled—

‘Silly girl,’ she said, but in accents not unkindly, ‘you are far too romantic. Do I find the air less bracing or the scenery less beautiful because my lover is careering over the Continent?’

‘It is different with you,’ answered Ruth, ‘your engagement is made with the sanction of your friends. You are sure of the future.’

‘Indeed,’ answered Carrie, dreamily ‘and who told you, pray, that I am sure? Or, for

that matter, who is sure of anything in this world?’

‘I mean,’ said Ruth, ‘that you are not deceiving your friends or acting in opposition to them.’

Carrie was gazing out on the stream, where a swan had dived his head, duck fashion, into the water. With neck submerged he wriggled his other extremity, showing a kind of triangle made by his bent legs. The swan is endowed with a perfect genius for making himself ridiculous, and when he assumes this particular attitude, there is no more ludicrous spectacle on all the river. Apparently, however, Miss Dunlop, who, as a rule, evinced a keen sense of the ridiculous, was not struck by the comicality of the fowl’s evolutions, for she replied with a sigh—

‘Perhaps you are right. And it does, as you say, make a difference when one is *sure* of the future.’

They turned to re-enter the lane of the

golden hedge rows, when they were arrested by a voice shouting to someone to halt. Instinctively stopping and looking up the tow path — for they were on the shore opposite to Wapshot — they beheld the valiant Hoppy limping towards them with unwonted energy, and at intervals repeating his war-whoop, least haply they had not heard it.

When Hoppy reached them he doffed his hat, made an awkward obeisance, and stopped a moment to regain a lapsed breath, and to wipe the beads of perspiration from his forehead.

‘Good ev’nin’, ladies,’ he gasped when he had somewhat recovered himself, ‘they’re in a bit o’ trouble at Vicarage Farm, an’ Miss Westaway, she ast me to find you.’

‘Trouble!’ exclaimed Ruth, growing pale, ‘Oh, Mr Molt, what is it?’

‘Well,’ replied Hoppy, oracularly, ‘of course it’s *Him*.’

‘And what has “*Him*” been doing?’

inquired Miss Dunlop. 'And, indeed, who is Him?'

'W'y, it's that Mark. He's been at his old games. Only he's more owdaciouser nor ever this time.'

'Please, Hoppy, *do* tell us at once what is the matter?' said Ruth.

'Jail is the matter. I know'd he'd come to it sooner or later. An' sarve him right too for he's a bad lot, miss.'

At the word jail Ruth's palor increased, and she instinctively drew near to her friend who did not appear greatly impressed by the tragic nature of the revelation. Hoppy proceeded then with dignity of manner, and with an accent from which malice was not altogether absent, to observe—

'I'm to be a witness agen him.'

The chastened exultation which characterised this deliverance caused Miss Dunlop to laugh in spite of herself. With a graceful apology for her mirth, she said—

'And now, dear Mr Molt, do relieve the

anxiety of Miss Ruth here, and tell us in a word what the particular truth is of which you are a witness.'

'Cert'ny, miss, cert'ny,' said Hoppy, with another bow and another wipe at his damp forehead, 'you know the farm dairy supplies milk to people for a mile or more round Wapshot. An' Mark he often stops the boy an' takes a tanner or a bob off of 'im—which I meanter say, ladies, sixpence or a shillin'. Well, the young ladies they never says nuthin' about that, but lets 'im spend the money in the Three Feathers.'

'What a disreputable old father,' interposed Carrie.

'Ah! you may well say *that*,' acquiesced Hoppy, whose own notions in the matter of *meum* and *tuum* were not all that the Vicar of the parish might have wished. 'Last arternoon, Mark, he hears that the boy is goin' up to the Convent School on the 'ill to collect nine pun ten as was due. So he waits about for the boy as was a new un, an'

he meets 'im comin' from the school, money an' all. It was jest opposite my shanty—you knows Miss Ruth—an' I see it all from the window, on'y 'o course I didn't come forrad never thinkin' but Mark was on'y rushin' 'im for the price of a drink or two.'

'And did the boy give it up?' asked Ruth, who had somewhat regained her composure.

'Give it up! Faith, Mark shook it out of 'im, an' threatened to do for 'im if he peached. So the boy—he was a youth as 'adn't much o' the Tom Sayers about 'im—was off in one direction, and Mark, he bolts the other way. But not afore I came to the door and said "Good ev'nin'" to 'im. W'ich he replies to me, "Go to the devil," he says. An' that's as true as I'm stan'in' on this here tow-path.'

'A terrible parent, truly,' said Carrie.

'But who put him in prison?' inquired Ruth, thinking it unlikely that her friend Kate would proceed to such extreme measures in the case of her own father.

'It was this way, Miss. W'en the boy

come back an' tell his story, Miss Kate, she put on her 'at an' cloak, and went over to Riverdale. She see Sir Penton, an' the Magistrate's clerk—he was there. So w'ile Miss Kate tells her story, the clerk 'e takes it down. They reads it over to Miss Kate, and gits her to swear to it. Then the milk boy, *he's* sent for, an' he swears. That night there was a warrant out, an' this mornin' Mark was arrested in the Windsor Post Office, a' takin' out of a money horder in favour of a young gentleman friend of his as lives in London.'

'Poor, dear Kate,' exclaimed Ruth, with the tears springing to her eyes. 'How she will feel the shame of all this. Let us go to her, Carrie, and comfort her.'

'Eggscuse me,' continued Hoppy, 'but if I might take the liberty of sayin' it, I think Miss Kate wants you to do something more. She wants you to ask Miss Dunlop 'ere, to indooce Sir Penton to let her withdraw from

the prosecution, w'ich, she says, she never meant to go so far.'

'And you will, Carry dear, you will—for my sake' said Ruth, looking imploringly at her companion, her soft blue eyes full of an imploring sorrow.

'Eggscuse me agen ladies, but if I might make so bold—don't do nothin' of the sort. I don't 'old with Sir Penton in a general way. Me' an' 'im ain't friends, not by a long chalk. But 'e's right in this 'ere. Mark's in a 'alf boozed state most of 'is time, an' don't know wot 'e's adoin' of. Three months on the mill, 'ud cure 'im of the drink, an' praps of 'is other bad 'abits as well.'

Ruth turned upon Hoppy her mild eyes absolutely flashing with something very like anger.

'Oh, Hoppy how dare you be so cruel. And after all the trouble I have had in teaching you to be charitable to your neighbours.'

Hereupon the poor girl sobbed, breaking

down with the effort of a sudden outburst so foreign to her habits. Poor Hoppy who would willingly have cut off his hand to spare pain to his young mistress hung his head, in abashed silence. But Carrie taking the girl's hand, clasped it, saying—

‘There dear ! I’m sure Mr Molt does not *mean* to be unkind. And indeed his advice may be good after all.’

Even at her friend, Ruth looked upbraidingly and answered,

‘At all events let us go to them at once. Poor Kate !’

So for the time they abandoned their intention of retracing their footsteps through the lane of the golden leaves and struck along the tow path in the direction of Wapshot ferry, Hoppy following them with halting footsteps.

CHAPTER XII

A COUNTY BENCH

WHEN the infant of these British Islands of ours is called upon to sing to the nursery lyre the words—

‘I bless the goodness and the grace,
That on my birth have smiled,’

I trust he is made to include in the list of blessings, that are his by birthright, the inestimable boon of a County Bench. By such tribunals we have justice tempered or stimulated by common sense. The illum-

inated mind of the Vicar is aided by the worldly wisdom of the superannuated colonel, the deliberation of the pair receiving a solid commercial support in the opinion of some retired soap-boiler.

Before higher tribunals, how complicated is the machinery, how vexatious the delay, how enormous the expense! But a County Magistrate can, in the exercise of his discretion, dispense with all accessories, except, perhaps, the clerk and the policeman. He can advise a prosecution—nay, insist on its being commenced. Then he can grant the warrant; and finally, he can sit and hear the case, condemning and sentencing the trembling wretch against whom he is practically proceeding. A political economist will at once perceive how cheap, expeditious, and satisfactory must be justice administered after this fashion. Common people, who are not political economists, are perhaps less easily convinced of the beauties of the system.

In the case against Mark Westaway, Sir Penton Hook no doubt discharged the dual functions of prosecutor and judge. Nor could all the sophistry and all the blandishments of Miss Dunlop induce him to recile from the position he had taken up. For Carrie had succumbed to Kate Westaway's tears, and had essayed to persuade Sir Penton to permit the distracted girl to withdraw from the prosecution. Indeed, the only effect of Carrie's well-meant interference was that the little baronet had called at the farm, in a mood far from amiable, and had roundly informed the girls that unless they appeared against their father the result to themselves would be inconvenient if not disastrous. Moreover he sent his own lawyer to them, a gentleman who, he declared, would make things as pleasant as possible, and who, moreover, would protect them from any unpleasant cross-examination to which their revered parent might think fit to submit them.

Five days elapsed between the arrest of the fine old English gentleman and the next Petty Sessions of the district. And as, even by Justices of the Peace, highway robbery is not regarded as aailable offence, Mr Westaway had the immense advantage of complete isolation and repose, coupled with a plain and wholesome diet and an enforced abstinence from alcoholic liquors.

During those five days public opinion had risen to flood-tide—other matters of moment being completely swamped in the waves of comment on this. Once more the bar of the ‘Three Feathers’ was crowded at night, and Mark Westaway’s character was vindicated by his friends ; his daughters being denounced as ingrates for whom few parallels could be found in the blackest pages of history, sacred or profane.

‘Here’s a man,’ exclaimed Rymill, to a sympathetic audience, ‘who is nobody’s enemy but his own ; a man who never did an ill turn to a fellow-creature, an open-

handed generous gentleman, a thorough sportsman, and the life and soul of every company he goes into—set upon by his own daughters, whom he cherished from childhood's hour. It's enough to make a man's blood boil. It shatters one's faith in human nature. It's enough to drive a man to take poison. Parsons! give me another brandy and water.'

This was a long speech for the little veterinary surgeon, and it was received on all sides with respectful murmurs of assent. Hoppy alone did not join in the chorus. Indeed, he followed it with a grunt which the most sanguine person could hardly construe into an expression of approval. Hoppy's reticence was considered extremely annoying by these good-hearted adherents of a fellow-creature in trouble. So, Parsons, just to draw him out, asked from behind his bar,

'And what d'you say, Mr Molt?'

'Me?' said Hoppy, innocently, 'oh, I say nuthin'. Leastways wot I've got to say I

says on oath. Any of you as wishes to 'ear wot I've got to say can hear me up at the sessions.'

'It'll be quite a new sensation for Hoppy to appear in the witness-box. He'd feel more at home in the dock,' said Rymill, with some viciousness.

'Right you are, Mr Cow-doctor,' replied Hoppy, without any evidence of ill temper. 'But when I am in the box I won't make a mistake as I once knew a vet to make. I won't swear as a hoss with glanders was sufferin' from a cold in its 'ed.'

Having delivered this Parthian dart—an allusion evidently to some professional fiasco on the part of the surgeon—Hoppy limped away.

On the day before that fixed for the hearing, an event occurred which occasioned a further foment of public opinion. Mr James Gates arrived in Wapshot, accompanied by a somewhat down-at-heel old gentleman, with a black bag. It soon got abroad that this

latter personage was a solicitor from London who had come down to take up the cause of the much persecuted Westaway. The hopes of those who espoused the cause of the immured man rose perceptibly on the advent of this somewhat soiled and dubious lawyer. There was to be a fight after all. Lear's daughters and their patron Sir Penton were not to have it all their own way.

The eventful morning arrived. The Petty Sessions were on that day holden at Wrayton, so that those inhabitants of Wapshot who wished to hear this *cause celebre* were not obliged to travel to any considerable distance. And when the doors of the Town Hall were thrown open that edifice was speedily filled by an interested and excited crowd. Just in front of the table, at which the magistrates were to sit, the two sisters, looking unutterably pale and distressed, had been provided with chairs. On one side of them was seated Sir Penton's lawyer, and on the other sat Hoppy. That these persons

had been admitted by a private door before entrance was accorded to the general public, was unfavourably commented upon—causing the feeling against Kate and her sister to grow more intense. This suggestion was originally started by the ingenious Rymill. Those whose indignation was roused by so gross an instance of favouritism, forgot perhaps that as litigants the poor girls were somewhat interested in the proceedings.

Behind the seat set apart for the magistrates was an open stage with footlights and pieces of stock scenery—an amateur performance having taken place there on the previous evening. These tawdry effects greatly aided the imagination of the beholder in realising the dignity of the tribunal. The magistrate's clerk was busily engaged in interviews with inspectors who had charge of cases, or licensed victuallers seeking transfers, or litigious matrons wanting summonses against long suffering citizens who had boxed the tingling ears of their unruly brats. On

the benches apportioned to the general public there was the buzz of animated conversation.

Suddenly a door was thrown open within a few yards of the bench, and the inspectors and minor lights of the County Constabulary bawled 'silence' in loud and indignant tones. Four magistrates entered and took their places. Sir Penton was not among them. It was a practice of his to take his place after the majority of his brethren had gone in. It added effect and dignity to his entrance. Among the four, however, Hoppy was glad to see Mr O'Lympus, the Vicar, a worthy who very seldom made his appearance on the judgment seat, and, who, on this occasion, Hoppy argued to himself, had come with the intention of throwing oil on the troubled waters, and seeing that no unfair advantage was taken of his two parishioners.

For five minutes the magistrates amused themselves by signing documents handed to them by the clerk. Apparently they made no inquiry as to the contents of these por-

tentous sheets. They merely affixed their signatures as they had been desired. Had these been their own death warrants they would have appended their names with the same unhesitating confidence. Once more the side-door opened, and once more there arose from the rough throats of the police the cry of 'Silence,' only this time with louder volume and more indignant remonstrance than before. One ardent constable in the warmth of his professional ardour, shouting—'Make way for Sir Penton 'Ook.'

With his head thrown back, and his puny chest thrown out, he strutted pompously to his chair, and took his seat, gazing round on the audience before him with an expression of the utmost ill-will and contempt. He then drew from his back-pocket a silver sherry flask, and a square parcel, in white paper, containing sandwiches. Having thus assured himself of his own comfort, he said, in the petulant, and, indeed, insulting tone habitual to him—

‘Now, Mr Tippins, do pray let us get on with the business.’

Mr Tippins, the clerk, might have replied with evident reason that any delay which had hitherto taken place was attributable to Sir Penton himself. He, however, contented himself by calling the first case. We have no intention of following the justices in their deliberations over the various causes which they were supposed to well and truly try. There were the usual charges of drunkenness and assault, of turnip stealing and trespass. The Thames Conservancy appeared against bargees for running down boats. And the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals prosecuted owners of horses for running up hills..

While they were thus engaged in dealing out even-handed justice to her Majesty’s lieges, we may, perhaps, be permitted to sit in judgment on the magistrates themselves—seeing of what manner of man this riparian Bench was composed. Of the character of

Sir Penton and the Vicar you already understand something, or I have written to little purpose. On the Bench the worthy chairman was as dogmatic and dictatorial as in the bosom of his own family. He could not brook contradiction, and to the legal gentlemen, who occasionally had the misfortune to appear before him, he was studiously offensive.

General Scabbart, who sat on the right of Sir Penton, and who was deputy chairman was a nonogenarian whose physical and mental powers had been spent in the service of his country. When in the absence of the chairman this gallant officer presided, the spectacle was one to impress a foreigner most favourably with our insular modes of dispensing the law. He could not hear unless he was shouted at. His mumbling when he delivered sentences could not be heard by those most interested. And when he attempted to sign his name his hand had to be guided by one of his colleagues.

By the side of the veteran Justice sat Mr Rhodes, who was a specimen of the class known as the landed gentry. He was seven years younger than the General and regarded himself, in consequence, as quite a hale young fellow. During the course of the proceedings this luminary was engaged in drawing with a pen on his blotting-pad. Sometimes he would lift the pad holding it between his face and the audience. When he put the pad down again and exposed his countenance he was apparently convulsed with laughter. He had probably been drawing caricatures of his rival, the General—who, in addition to the infirmities of deafness and indistinctness of utterance was almost blind and was ignorant therefore of the pictorial ribaldry of Mr Rhodes.

On the other side of the chairman and between him and Mr O'Lympos was seated Lord Taype about whom I need only say this—that his lordship was a congenital idiot, and the fact was known to his family and the

public at large. Like Mr Rhodes he fancied some diversion while condemned to sit on the seat of judgment. This he found in attempts to catch the few flies called to life by the heated atmosphere of the Court or in making two quill pens run a steeplechase along the table in front of him. These occupations did not appear to him frivolous nor were they pursued for the mere sake of amusement. His face was full of a sad earnestness, a grave determination, as he made a whisk at the fly that settled before him, or as he propelled the unconscious quills towards their goal.

At last the case of Mark Westaway was called on and at the same time the solicitor from London, who had been in company with his client in the waiting-room set apart for prisoners, took his seat at the table sacred to men of law.

When Mark stepped airily into the dock a hum of admiration and sympathy ran through the audience. A week in confinement had

done the old man a world of good. He had sent home for his dress clothes, and arrayed in these sables he stood proudly before his judges. His venerable gray hair was scrupulously brushed, his linen faultless, and his celebrated seals dangled as jauntily as ever at his fob. He bowed to the Bench with such an air of hauteur that one for the moment almost felt that he was there to try the magistrates. Then he turned round upon the audience, smiled, nodded familiarly and even winked. These evidences of regard were received with laughter by the audience, which was in turn suppressed by loud cries of 'Silence' from the police.

Meanwhile, the daughters of this object of universal sympathy buried their faces in their hands, to hide the burning blushes and hot tears that told their shame. Folding his arms and shrugging his shoulders Mark finally turned his gaze on those recreant children, and stared at them with a con-

temptuous smile playing about his classic features.

The charge was read over. Mark pleaded not guilty.

‘I appear to prosecute,’ said Sir Penton’s local solicitor.

‘And I appear for the defence,’ said the seedy lawyer from London.

‘Who are *you*?’ asked Sir Penton in his dry and irritating way.

‘I am Mr Abel Dexter—attorney at law,’ replied the other blandly.

‘Tippins—hand me the Law List.’

The clerk handed that admirable directory up to the Bench, and Sir Penton having discovered Mr Dexter’s name among the ‘D’s’ said in a tone of great displeasure,

‘I presume it’s all right; but I am quite at a loss to imagine what defence you can offer.’

‘I shall be able to tell you more about that, Sir, when I have heard the evidence,’ replied the solicitor from London. At this

the audience once more signified their approval, and as, at the same moment one of Lord Taype's quills, in passing the winning post, jumped right on to the chairman's sandwiches, the worthy baronet's temper was far from agreeable.

To the intense disappointment of those who had come to assist at this great function, it was apparent from the mildness of Mr Dexter's cross-examination of the witnesses that some arrangement had been arrived at by the two solicitors. This impression was confirmed, when, at the close of that evidence, the solicitor appearing for Mark Westaway's daughters asked permission to address the Bench.

A senile laugh greeted this proposal. But when it was discovered that the cachination proceeded from Mr Rhodes, whose happy fancy had developed itself on the blotting-pad in a drawing more than usually grotesque, the incident was allowed to pass

unnoticed, and the prosecuting solicitor spoke to the following effect—

‘I need scarcely tell you, gentlemen, that this case is an extremely painful one. Particularly painful to the two young women who have, after condoning many offences, been at last, for self-protection, obliged to prosecute their father for a serious offence.’

‘Painful to them!’ exclaimed Mark from the dock. ‘How painful is it to *me*, then?’

‘Brayvo!’ timidly from Rymill.

‘Silence!’ from the police.

‘If you say another word, prisoner, I shall commit you,’ from Sir Penton.

The lawyer proceeded—

‘But, notwithstanding, the many offences which this wretched man has committed, my clients are willing, at the eleventh hour, to show him a consideration which he has never extended to them.’

‘You can’t withdraw the charge,’ said Sir Penton, testily.

‘I have no intention of doing so, Sir. But, having consulted with my friend, who appears for the prisoner, I have to appeal to the Bench, to mark their sense of the prisoner’s crime by binding him over to keep the peace in such sureties, and for such a time, as your worships may think fit.’

Mr Dexter acquiesced in his opponent’s suggestion, and Mark turned round once more and winked at the audience. The Bench retired to consider their decision, and Mark was conducted back to his waiting-room by a stalwart policeman.

When the Bench returned, Mark was put forward once more, and when Lord Taype, after sundry divings under the table, recovered his quill steeple-chasers, Sir Penton, in his hard metallic tone, addressed himself thus to Mr Mark Westaway—

‘Your appearance here to-day is no surprise to any of us. You have long been a disgrace to the village in which you live, and a danger to the community. A drunkard

and a loafer—you have at last developed into a thief. By the demeanour of some of those present to-day I infer that you have sympathisers. Those persons had better understand that in the enjoyment of your society they render themselves liable to be marked by the police as the associates of thieves. Owing to the foolish fondness of those daughters, whose prospects in life you have done your best to ruin, we are not asked to send you to a felon's cell—in which retreat however, you will no doubt eventually find yourself. You will be bound over to keep the peace towards all Her Majesty's subjects for six months; yourself in one surety for fifty pounds and in two others of fifty pounds each. And in order that you may understand the significance of this sentence, I may inform you that if you molest your daughters by act or word you will at once be put into jail.'

Sir Penton had carefully studied this little speech, and was delighted to see

how his repetition of the word 'thief,' and his artful threat to the old sportsman's associates cut him to the quick. Sir Penton watched him as the iron entered his soul, saw his ruddy face turn ashen, watched his hands convulsively grasping the rail in front of him, saw him bite his lip till the blood flowed. Mark had looked forward to this day of trial as a triumphant scene in which a London lawyer would make a sport of his enemies. It had turned out a tame and spiritless performance. Sir Penton had filled the cup of his humiliation and he had been compelled to drink it to the dregs.

He staggered as he left the dock and hissed an awful oath through his teeth. But as the hubbub of conversation rose on the rising of the Bench that blasphemy was no more heard than was the piteous sobbing of his daughters.

CHAPTER XIII

VILLAINS OF THE PIECE

WHEN wanted for reputable purposes, money is difficult to get. In the face of charity, distress, or religion, money becomes uncommonly 'tight.'

'I weigh not Cressus' wealth a straw,'

is a line from a very old song. No one sings that now. When wanted for disreputable and unholy purposes, money is less coy. At the beck of avarice, passion, and dishonesty, the gold stream flows. Widows and orphans press forward, in eager emulation, to float

the bubbles of swindlers in the city. And book-makers, touts, and tipsters draw many millions annually from those whom, in the retirement of their chaste homes, they call mugs or flats.

Jim Gates, as a man of the world, thoroughly understood this philosophy — that capital wanted for a vile investment was not difficult to obtain. He therefore felt surprised and aggrieved that the 'guv'nor' should have failed to convey to him the comparatively small sum upon which he was to have started the business of a turf prophet, thus founding not only his own fortunes, but those also of the venerable sportsman, whom he knew to be the author of his being.

With a want of consideration, unhappily characteristic, the police who arrested Mark Westaway had impounded the money found on his person, and, by an order of the Bench, it had been restored to its rightful owners. To Jim, this was all very annoying and em-

barrassing. Mark, however, was in no mood to be talked to about money. Sir Penton's speech had maddened him. In his cups he would swear most awful oaths against that county magnate; and threaten everybody suspected of sympathising with his daughters, with pains and penalties too terrible for repetition.

For the present, at least, Jim thought it advisable to let the financial question rest. By-and-by he might have schemes more fresh and feasible to suggest to the fine old English gentleman. At present he would appeal to his wounded pride, and work on his morbid desire for revenge. Jim was one of those amiable philosophers, 'who, when he could not do a good turn for himself, would find a congenial occupation in contriving mischief to others.

During this visit of his to the place of his nativity, Jim Gates—for reasons which may be somewhat obvious—did not stop at the 'Three Feathers.' For although Mr Par-

sons took some amount of pride in the professional and social success of his daughter, Polly, he could not be expected to regard with respect, or even approval, the gallant who had induced her to leave her home, and who, under a promise of marriage, had made her defy one of the most fundamental principles in our system of social ethics. He lodged at the lock-keeper's house, t'other side the stream, and had established himself a great favourite with the children of the house. Not first favourite, indeed; that place in their innocent affections being accorded to Mark. But, in his own expressive slang, he 'ran a good second.'

Here, full of wrath and burning to express a sense of his wrongs, Mark came daily. And the two would wander forth, discussing the topics of greatest moment to them. All barriers that had ever existed between those two were broken down. And although Mark was not without doubts about the genuineness of Jim's avowals, and although

there were moments when he hated him for the scrapes, which were certainly of his devising, the bond of a common crime drew them together. Conscious of a partnership in guilt, the old man felt more comfortable in the company of the other conspirator.

During these excursions both men became conscious of the fact that Hoppy was on their track. He had a most wonderful faculty for surprising the pair in the midst of a private and animated conversation. He turned up at the most unexpected times and in the most unexpected places.

There was nothing in Mr Molt's demeanour to denote that he was playing the part of spy. His manner to Mark and Jim was frank and open to a fault. If they were in the neighbourhood of a hostelry he would request them without any ostentatious hospitality to enter; and then he would buy ale for their consumption. But for all his civility the villains felt that he was on the watch, and on more than one occasion he had almost

succeeded in seizing a conversation which he was by no means intended to hear. Drink and distress had greatly increased Mark's natural irritability, and he sometimes resented these surprises in a tone of vituperative eloquence quite refreshing to hear. He speedily succumbed, however, to friendly proffers of beer.

Like the lower animals, Hoppy was a creature of instinct. He felt intuitively that under the filial guidance of Jim, Mark would avenge his recent troubles on somebody. On whom? A notorious coward, Jim was quite unlikely to advise a direct attack on Sir Penton. He would be the subject of indirect annoyance. Indirectly, through whom? It was for an answer to this question that Hoppy was now playing the detective. Did he only possess the nice perceptions and infallible power of logic displayed by 'Brutus' or by 'Serf' how soon would he get at the secrets of these wily conspirators.

The wind swept the broad main thoroughfare of Slough—Slough displaying more than ordinary symptoms of despond on that dreary Autumn afternoon. Mark and his London acquaintance had trudged hither on some vague pretence of the former that he wanted to 'do a deal' with an inhabitant of this most melancholy town; but in reality that he might enjoy the only luxury left him, that, namely, of pouring the story of his grievances and his desire for revenge into sympathetic ears. Jim on his part waited for favourable opportunities of suggesting fresh financial adventures to his sire. He had gently insinuated the desirability of acquiring by some means—honest or otherwise was to him a matter of entire indifference—a sufficient capital.

The old gentleman interrupted, and said, testily—

'It's always the old story with you. Money, money, money! Have you no stomach for revenge.'

‘With money we could soon get revenge guv’nor,’ suggested Jim.

‘And *without* it. D’ye hear *that*? *Without* it. Am I to be called a thief by a white livered hound like Hook? I’m a gentleman, Jim. My forefathers owned Wapshot before there was a Hook in the country.’

Jim bowed his acquiescence in this historical exaggeration.

‘And who the devil are the Hooks, anyhow?’ inquired the old man, stopping for an instant on the sidepath and stamping his foot.

‘I fancy,’ replied Jim, venturing on a mild joke, ‘that I have heard of Hooks being hung.’

‘Have you? Then, by the lord, you must get me chapter and verse for it, and I’ll have the news sent all over the county.’

‘Even that would require money,’ said Jim, seeing a fair opening for the introduction of his favourite topic.

The old gentleman evaded the subject and said :

‘I don’t suppose you’ve ever paid out young Hook for the hiding he gave you at Wrayton Fair.’

There was a touch of triumphant malice in Mark’s tone ; and Jim coloured to his forehead as he replied,

‘Young Hook, from all I hear, is likely to pay himself out. He’s going the pace, is Dick. He’s always behind the scenes at the theatre, and when he’s not at Polly Parsons’ house, she’s at his chambers. Then he’s got in with the *Tipster* lot, bets like a king, and drinks like a lord.’

‘You don’t mean that?’ said the older man, with undisguised delight. Jim freely and circumstantially gauranteed the invention, and, moreover, pictured himself as the wily tempter who had led the baronet’s son into the course of vice and dissipation which he graphically sketched.

Mark's face brightened, as he gazed admiringly on his offspring.

'That's good, Jim, that's very good. The drink—that'll make him an easy victim. Then what little the women leave him the book-makers will take. I know them. I've been through the mill, Jim.'

'You were a hot 'un in your time, I've always been told,' said the dutiful James, in flattering accents.

'Ah! that I have, my boy,' he exclaimed, with honest pride. 'I've lived every day of *my* life; and I don't regret it. I glory in it. For, no matter what Sir Penton may say, I've always been a gentleman, Jim, always a gentleman. The man who says otherwise lies.'

'No one ever did deny it,' replied Jim, with evident feeling, 'except Sir Penton.'

'A dirty dog, a d—d dirty dog,' added the fine old English gentleman, in tones of unmistakable fury.

The two then who had been parading

slowly up the street now came upon a picture which, in my humble opinion, was quite calculated to cheer and brighten the dull and melancholy thoroughfare. And the sight was that of Carrie Dunlop and Ruth Gilliat crossing the side-path from the shop of a music-seller. They were followed by a shopman carrying a roll of the latest triumphs of Tosti, or Marzials, or Molloy. They entered a village cart, and their packages having been bestowed, Carrie took the reins and drove off. Neither of them noticed for a moment the two men who now gazed after the departing vehicle as it rattled up the street.

Apart from any personal interest which these children of darkness might have in the disappearing figures, they were in themselves quite calculated to attract attention. The regal beauty of Miss Dunlop was set off with costly fur trimmings. And Ruth, although her dress was still simple, displayed certain undefinable arts of costume which had

not previously been observable. Her dress was less severe, less Quakerish. A patch of colour here, a half coquettish turn in the bonnet, a slightly more ambitious style of architecture in the sunshade, rendered her a trifle less Puritanic in appearance; and these were reforms which had been brought about, I imagine, by the influence of Miss Dunlop and in the interests of Dick.

It was not admiration alone, however, that filled the mind of Jim Gates as he gazed after the ladies. He had become the subject of an illumination. The presence of Ruth had spurred his imagination. He suddenly struck his thigh with his open palm, exclaiming—

‘I’ve hit it, guv’nor, I’ve hit it this time!’

Then he led his willing companion into the nearest tavern, and, having gone into the bar parlour, closed the door.

This method of procedure was very annoying and embarrassing to Mr Molt, who had appeared, with pantomimic suddenness, either

from the bowels of the earth, or from behind a contiguous corner. He saw the conspirators enter the parlour. He ordered for himself a drink, and then he proceeded to place his best ear to the keyhole of the room. But, alas! though he could hear the sound of voices in conversation, he could distinguish no intelligible words. It was a blurred and indistinct hum. He would rather have heard no sound at all. These confidences, audible but untranslatable, maddened him.

‘What is it you’ve hit?’ inquired Mark, when they were safely in the room.

‘You told me some time ago that young Hook sends his infernal love-letters addressed to Kate at your farm.’

‘That’s so. A nice reputable position for a gentleman’s daughter to put herself in. A go-between. Good heavens! that a man like myself should live to see his daughter little better than a procuress.’

‘Very humiliating,’ said Jim, with ready sympathy. ‘Does Kate know that you

are aware of the real destination of the letters ?'

'I think not. I have taken them from the postman myself, and handed them to her. Then I've seen her hand them, unopened, to the ranter's daughter. I wasn't born yesterday, my lad. Can put two and two together as well as the best of them.'

'Do they come on any particular day ?'

'Yes, Sundays. The gal calls for 'em on her way from church. Nice religious sort of game. For downright deep devilment, give me the tub-thumping division.'

'Now, listen to me, guv'nor,' went on Jim, talking in a lower tone, and with a more emphatic manner, 'this is Thursday. I'll go back to town to-morrow. And on next Sunday, two letters will come from Mr Hook instead of one. You must meet the postman and take the letters. One of them will have a small cross in the corner. Hand that to Kate. Stick the other in your pocket.

I daresay you'll find it amusing. Those spooney letters always are funny reading.'

'But the other—the letter with the cross?'

'Will be written by me. I'll borrow a letter of Hook's from Baby Parsons. And I've a great genius for imitating the handwriting of other people. Which makes it quite as well, perhaps, that you haven't got a banking account.' He said this with a chuckle, which was not quite appreciated by his senior.

'But what will be in the letter with the cross?'

'Never you mind. Ask no questions and you'll be told no lies.'

'But, damitall, I don't want to work in the dark. Tell me, Jim, what'll be in the letter with the cross?'

'Revenge, guv'nor,' replied Jim, with a diabolical intensity in his tone. 'That's what'll be in it. A revenge that will include them all—and madden and degrade them all. How does that suit your book?'

‘Will it—will it hurt my girls?’ he asked, eagerly.

‘Indirectly.’

‘Couldn’t you manage it so that they’d be made feel it as much as the rest?’ he inquired, with parental eagerness — ‘Can’t you make ’em smart, eh, Jim?’

‘They’ll suffer with the rest.’

‘Damme, Jim,’ exclaimed the old sportsman, seizing the hand of the younger one and shaking it with genuine emotion. ‘You’re a chip of the old block. You’re a gentleman, Jim—you are by G—d ; and if this turns up trumps, I’ll have another try for the money.’

When Hoppy, exhausted with the effort of straining his ear at the draughty keyhole and beyond measure irritated by his failure to catch a syllable, opened the door and walked in, he beheld a touching sight. Mark and Jim were shaking hands as though they had not met for many weary years, and in the eye of the elder there glistened the manly tear.

‘What the devil do *you* want?’ was the less than civil greeting of Mark.

‘A drink,’ curtly replied the other ‘it’s a public house.’

‘This is a private room,’ said Jim, in a vexed tone, ‘and to tell you the truth you’ve been lately giving us more of your company than is quite agreeable.’

‘Taint a private room,’ said Hoppy, without resentment, ‘an’ as to your comp’ny, I don’t think it’s likely to credit anybody. However, I ain’t particular. Have a drink?’

Though this was an invitation which neither of the conspirators was in the habit of declining, they once more commended the soul of Hoppy to the care of the Prince of Darkness and strode out of the room with quite a wonderful pretence of offended dignity.

Hoppy shook his head sadly, and as he crossed the threshold of the house murmured to himself,

‘That there advice—“’e that ’ath ears to
’ear let ’im ’ear,” wasn’t meant for them as
listens at keyholes.’

CHAPTER XIV

THE LETTER KILLETH

THE sun shines with impartial ray upon the just and upon the unjust. And our greatest and most beneficent institutions resemble the sun in this that the operations of the philanthropist and the villain fructify with equal rapidity under their genial influences. Take for example the Penny Post. It is at once a blessing and a curse. It extends knowledge, conveys charity, and aids commerce. But it is the engine of the swindler, it carries the prussic acid of the murderer, and dissemi-

nates the deadly poison of those whose merchandise is immorality. The same post-bag may contain the pastoral of an Archbishop and the threatening letter of an evicted tenant. The mail caters alike for saint and sinner. And Her Majesty—with all reverence be it spoken—acts, now as an angel of light, and again as an unconscious plotter with the Prince of Darkness.

There is a Sunday morning delivery at Wapshot-on-Thames. And on the Sabbath morning following his interview with Jim Gates the worthy Westaway perambulated the road between Vicarage Farm and the village—presumably to take the air. Mark's face had become very blotchy and bloated, but he had on this morning arrayed himself with more than ordinary care and he trifled with the seals depending from his fob with something of the old spirit.

An ten o'clock precisely, the post-boy—an overgrown and lumpy lout with no more brains than a scooped turnip, was espied

turning the corner of the lane leading to Wapshot. Mark assumed an easy and indifferent gait and strolled towards the bearer of Her Majesty's mails. When he arrived close to him he stopped with an air of surprise and said in a tone of rebuke,

‘Very late, this morning, Tom.’

At the same time he pulled out his heavy hunting watch and rattled the seals so as to add effect and importance to his reprimand.

Tom, thus admonished, replied that the fault was none of his ; and Mark with characteristic modesty declined to play the part of Post-master General. Indeed, he was apparently willing to condescend to the less ambitious functions of a letter carrier.

‘Any letters for the farm?’ he inquired, extending his hand for their reception.

‘Two,’ laconically replied the boy, without opening his bag.

‘Hand ’em over. I’m going back there.’

‘They’re for Miss Kate,’ answered the lout.

‘Great heavens, Tom! What can it matter who they’re for; I only want to save you the walk, my lad.’

‘But’—

“‘But” be hanged, Tom. Hand ’em over, or I’ll think you mean to insult me. Upon my soul, I will.’ And the old man stamped his foot, and glared at Tom with a mighty show of indignation and wounded pride.

After fumbling for one short moment at the lock of the bag, the post-boy did that thing which he ought not to have done. He handed the two letters to Mark Westaway. That artful man turned laughingly to the feeble youth, and said, with much gaiety—

‘Upon my word, I have half a mind to make you take them to the farm yourself. Why, you hesitated as much as if you thought I was a thief. Good-morning, Tom.’

When Mark was out of the gentle Tom’s sight, he examined the envelopes, and thrust-

ing one of the letters into his pocket, carried the other in his hand to the Vicarage Farm.

For the last four or five days his daughters had been encouraged to hope for the best. Their parent had been more subdued in demeanour, and had been permitted to occupy his own room at the farm. They believed with others in the village that alcohol had taken deadly effect on Mark's brain, and that he was not quite accountable for all that he said and did. They were sanguine and stout-hearted young women, and apt to take the most hopeful view of things. So the demeanour, attributable to plotting, they put down to penitence; and for the best part of a week they had lived without any open quarrel in the same house as their father.

When the good man arrived at the farm, he found that his daughters were dressing for church. He, therefore, left the letter on Kate's prayer book, and once more sought the solace of the outer air. He was pleased

with himself. He was at peace with the world—barring a few insignificant exceptions. And he had the approval of a conscience which had become as deteriorated as himself. He whistled a gay lilt, while the October wind made moan in the branches of the elms.

Mark was a great believer in the social proprieties. He was a stickler for good form. He believed with the Laureate that the 'grand old name of gentleman' should be borne 'without abuse.' Now, Mr Molt had recently displayed the worst possible 'form' in following him about and playing the spy. He would call upon Molt, and cover that erring mortal with confusion. He would humble him with satiric pleasantries. For the plot—whatever it was—had now succeeded, and Mark felt happy and hilarious.

Unconscious of any intentions, amiable or otherwise, on the part of Westaway, Mr Molt sat in his shanty, spelling out the opinions of 'Brutus' and the 'Serf.' The

labour of reading had become comparatively easy to him now. And with the facility of deciphering, he had acquired the power of understanding much that before had been enfolded in deep darkness.

This he counted as particularly fortunate on the present occasion, as his own division of the county was, on this particular Sunday, the subject of the eloquent periods of 'Brutus.' The text of that great writer was found in a paragraph under the head of 'Election Intelligence,' which read as follows: 'By the death of Lord Purvis, a vacancy is rendered in the representation of the —— Division of the County of ——. It is believed that Sir Penton Hook, Bart., has been decided upon, by the Conservative party, to succeed Lord Purvis.'

It was surprising the height of denunciation to which 'Brutus' rose in dealing with this simple theme. He writhed in an agony as he appealed to the sovereign people to rescue the county from the domination of

a corrupt clique. He heaped an Ossa of abuse upon a Pelion of ridicule, and tumbled the whole mass upon the prostrate form of the Baronet. He called upon those who respected the popular cause, to select a free-man made in the image of God, as their representative, and to reject a puny impostor, the inheritor of a baronetcy awarded by an impecunious monarch to an unscrupulous usurer ; a magisterial mummy, and the champion of a territorial system, unparalleled for injustice, cruelty, and corruption, in the history of the civilised or uncivilised world.

This, it must be admitted, was very fine writing, and was not without its effect upon the spirits of Hoppy. Indeed, when Mark mounted the steps of the shanty, and entered its wooden walls, he found that Molt was in as happy and hilarious a condition as himself. He was inclined to let bygones be bygones. He requested the veteran sportsman to be seated. He proffered him beer, inquired after the health of the young ladies, and

made no allusion whatever to recent proceedings before the county magistrates. Indeed, his mood was so unusually bright, that Mark, who was a little mad himself, and consequently apt to impute insanity to others, came to the conclusion that his humble acquaintance had become demented. This impression was alarmingly increased when Hoppy inquired—

‘Wot would it cost to fight this ’ere county agen’ Sir Penton ’Ook?’

‘You’re not going to stand—are you Molt?’ asked Mark, in a patronisingly pitying way.

‘No, I ain’t. But I’ll tell you wot I *ken* do. I’ve got a matter of three hundred pound in the bank, an’ blimy I don’t mind spendin’ two hundred of it in supportin’ a man as ‘Brutus’ here would approve on.’

‘And what sort of a man’s he?’ inquired Mark, in a somewhat superior tone.

‘He must respect the popular cause.’

‘I know. Manhood suffrage and a fair

division of property all round. Well to begin with, Molt, my man, you can have all my interest in Vicarage Farm.'

'And,' went on Hoppy with some access of solemnity 'he must be a freeman made in God's image.'

'Then, Hoppy, tip us your two hundred, for I'm your man. Down with everybody, redistribution of everything. Free beer, and fair fighting. That's your sort!'

Hoppy shrugged his shoulders. It is probable that he did not recognise in Mark a nature approaching even the poor ideal of 'Brutus.'

'What would you think of me, Molt, as a candidate?' seizing on the idea and turning it from a possibility into a reality, as is the way with softening brains.

'I keep my thoughts to myself. Them as goes out with the fisherman don't know what fish he's got in his well. Likewise they don't know wot's in his mind.'

'Ah! you rascal,' retorted Mark, play-

fully, 'but *I* know what's in your well. I know how you fellows go out on Saturday and fill the well of your punts with barbel and roach and dace so that the Cockney who goes out with you on Sunday may have a good take to show his friends. I know the tricks of the river my friend.'

'Ah,' said Hoppy reflectively. 'Well, p'raps it aint quite honest. Leastways, I shouldn't suppose it's honest accordin' to your way o' thinkin', Mark. You'd be more likely to take summat out of a well than to put summat in.'

There was an awkward silence after this, and the conversation becoming less playful, at last died out altogether. The music of the church bells was in the air when Mark took leave of Mr Molt without having delivered a syllable of those rebukes with which he was charged. Thus do even the most gifted and impulsive of our species become the creatures of circumstance.

The dearly beloved brethren of the

Reverend Fitzpatrick O'Lympus had assembled and met together under the moss grown tiles of Wapshot church to ask those things that are requisite and necessary as well for the body as for the soul. One or two brasses in the chancel indicated the ashes of magnates who had arisen and fallen long before the advent of the Hooks and a mural tablet to Dame Westaway testified to a period when the holders of Vicarage Farm were leaders of society in the village of Wapshot.

The sturdy oak rafters under the sloping roof are worm-eaten. The stained old walls, the chipped pillars, and the mouldering pews contrast strangely with the altar, the brilliant stained glass window beyond it, the pulpit elegantly carved in freestone, and the brass eagle supporting the lectern. The window was the gift of the Vicar. The pulpit and the lectern testified to the practical piety of Lady Hook.

In the square family pew sat that estim-

able lady, sad and placid. Sir Penton, with an added importance in his manner, joined with emphatic devotion in the responses—not that he himself had much need of the petitions which he put up; but he considered it the correct thing to set an example to his inferiors. Moreover, there was no telling what influence his prayers for others might have upon the Hearer of prayer. And, after all, these worshipping clods of earth had votes for the County.

Miss Dunlop had also a seat in the Squire's pew; and it may be admitted at once that she was the most picturesque devotee in the sacred building. So, at all events, thought Ruth, sitting on the other side of the aisle by the side of her good friends, the Westaways.

O'Lympus was an excellent writer. His letters in the *Field* always commanded attention, and it is well known that certain articles on the gentle art of angling which attracted attention in *Blackwood* and in

Baily were from his pen. But he felt that theological argument was not his forte. So, like the sensible man that he was, he very often substituted homilies of the Fathers for sermons of his own. It was a deceit that the Fathers themselves would not, I am sure, have disapproved—supposing it had been possible to consult them on the matter.

The formal but striking style of the older preachers, their quaint illustrations and blunt practical admonitions, harmonised with the worm-eaten oak, the broken pillars, the worn and blackened font. Similar addresses had sounded in the ears of generations long dead and gone.

These old sermonisers were accustomed at times to seek for their texts in the writings of the minor prophets. And from Zechariah on this day the vicar in clear, sonorous voice read out the words—

‘I was wounded in the house of my friends.’
A curious text, Ruth thought as her mild

eyes dwelt on the face of the preacher ; and some singular lessons she would take away with her: rare seed to be sown thereafter in the stony ground of Hoppy's heart. But the text itself seemed to impress her more than the homily founded on it. Unconsciously she repeated it over and over again. Surely a very weird and inscrutable scripture, although, to the mind of the ancient divine, who spoke through the mouth of Mr O'Lympos, capable of but one sacred application.

After church, Ruth accompanied her friends to the farm, and then in their little drawing-room the letter was handed to her. What a world of love lighted her eyes as she took it! How exquisite the blush that first tinged her cheeks as she opened the seal, the Westaways, meanwhile, turning their heads to the garden, where leaves of brown and yellow chased each other along the central path.

Ah ! the little tragedies of life, and their poor, innocent, unsuspecting victims !

When the sisters turned back, Ruth was standing fixed as a statue, and as pale ; the letter she still held in her hand, but she was gazing before her with frightened eyes. The blood had left her lips.

Kate hurried to her side.

‘Ruth, dear, you are ill.’

‘No, no, indeed, Kate—that is’—

‘You have had bad news, darling. Let me help you.’

‘Yes,’ she stammered, ‘No ; I must go home, Kate. I must go home—and—and think.’

The sisters were astonished. They who had imparted to them a portion, at all events, of Dick’s epistles were suddenly shut out from Ruth’s confidence.

Even in her wretchedness she could see that her reserve distressed the sisters. Tears sprang to her eyes. She said in a low, parched tone—

‘Do not speak to me now. Indeed, indeed, you are my dearest friends; and I will tell you when—when I have thought.’

She held out her hand to take leave.

They kissed her cold cheek. And, without saying another word, she walked out, erect and rigid, between the ranks of the leafless rose trees, and out into the road, that seemed to reel beneath her.

Mark Westaway, returning from the ‘Three Feathers,’ met her there and then. He took off his hat to her, with a movement of good old crusted gallantry, and politely intimated that it was a fine day. She answered nothing, but sped on her way, offering up meek supplications to heaven, that strength to reach her home might be accorded to her.

Arrived there, she reached her bedroom and locked the door, and began to read over again Dick’s letter. It was in these words :

‘MY DARLING,

‘I am ill and in great trouble, but you must not tell *anybody*. Try and see me in London on Monday, if only for a moment. There is an express at eleven o’clock. You can get back to Wapshot without anyone being the wiser. To see you may save me. *Do* come.

‘DICK.’

The words burned themselves into her memory as she sat staring at them there, trying to think it out. But there was no use in the attempt to argue. All ‘pros’ and ‘cons’ were overborne by the one consideration—‘He is ill and in trouble. I must go to him.’

Love laughs at locksmiths, we are informed. Love also laughs at logic.

CHAPTER XV

‘FROM OUT THE BITTERNESS OF THINGS’

CIRCUMSTANCES will conspire to help the wrong-doer up to a certain point; and circumstances conspired to help Ruth in accomplishing her wish to visit her distressed lover. On Monday, Mr Gilliat had to attend a religious festival as far away as Reading, and he left in the early morning of that day.

It was, perhaps, as well, because Ruth's haggard appearance might have aroused suspicion. Her eyes were red with weeping,

and her pallid cheeks told a pathetic story. In fact, the poor girl had passed an absolutely sleepless night. There was so much to think of, and she had hitherto been so much accustomed to depend on the advice of others.

At first she half thought of making Miss Dunlop her *confidante*. But she felt that that lady would scarcely applaud her intention. She might, indeed, confide in the Westaways; but, however they might approve of her resolution, she could not ask their assistance in any step which might incur for them the disapproval, and even resentment of Sir Penton Hook. Martha was out of the question. She was devoted, no doubt, to her young mistress; but her first duty was to her master, and to that duty, as Ruth well knew, she would be staunch.

Yet, she did not feel sure of her own strength. She must have some one to whom she could fly. The name of Hoppy occurred to her, at first only in a vague, dreamy

way, to be dismissed as absurd upon the very inception of the idea. But on the recurrence of the notion, it seemed more feasible, and when she had dwelt upon it half-a-dozen times, she had come to the conclusion, that, upon the whole, there was no person in the wide world so fitted by nature to be her protector. In the intricate paths of science, philosophy, and religion, she had indeed guided the stumbling steps of Mr Molt. But when one has lost one's way in the rough and tangled bye-ways of real life, a woman finds it a great comfort to seek the aid of a man, no matter how lowly his condition.

She would go to Hoppy.

At ten o'clock on this eventful Monday, Mr Molt, hatless and in his shirt sleeves, was engaged in digging up a corner of his garden-patch. The dew of honest labour was on his brow, and he was singing, apparently for the delectation of Brutus the

lurcher, a song, the refrain of which he rendered somewhat thus—

‘Oh, the birds was a-singing in the mawnin’,
The hivy and the myrtle was in bloom,
The sun o’er the ’ills was adornin’,
That’s wen we laid ’er in the tomb.’

Brutus wagged his tail in mute approval of his master’s music.

Suddenly the wagging grew more emphatic. In fact, grew so emphatic as to be quite out of proportion to the merits of Mr Molt’s relatively respectable performance. Moreover, Brutus pricked his ears, tugged at his chain, and whined to be set free. His quick ear caught some welcome sound on the road-way. In another minute the latch was lifted, and Ruth stood within the enclosure—her pale and pitiful face turned appealingly upon the occupier of the freehold.

Hoppy dropped his spade in sheer amazement and distress.

‘Lor, Miss, you ain’t ill, are you?’ he inquired, with real sympathy.

‘No, Hoppy, I’m not ill. But somebody very dear to me is ill, and in trouble.’

‘Not Mawster, Miss?’

‘No. Someone that is in London. Someone that I *must* see.’

‘But do Mawster know?’ inquired Mr Molt, doubtfully.

‘No, Hoppy. And he must not know. Indeed, indeed Hoppy, he must not know. But I trust you. And you will come with me, will you not, and take care of me? We will get back quite soon and no one shall be the wiser.’

‘Well I’m blessed,’ said Hoppy to himself, gazing at her poor pleading face and eyes sadder than those of the Mater Dolorosa. Had Ruth asked him to accompany her to the Pit of Tophet he would have made use of the same felicitous benediction. But he would have gone all the same.

In the page of romance the knight—errant and otherwise—has received more than his fair share of public applause. After

all he worked for a reward. He performed marvellous feats in the arena 'before the eyes of ladies and of kings.' He seems to have lived tolerably well. He kept good cattle and was immensely popular with the dames of the period.

Poor Hoppy was a lame adventurer—a social pariah, a reviler of the laws of his country. He believed in Bradlaugh, and in the rights of man—that is to say the right of any one man to the rights of all others. He never went to church. He had been detected using night lines. And he was known to have turned a more or less honest penny at poaching and horse-coping. But for pure and selfish devotion, without thought or hope of reward, Hoppy appears to me to possess the true heroic qualities. And I rank him above many who figured in the ancient lists with nodding plume, lance in rest and bright armour glistening in the sunshine.

When Hoppy had said ‘Well I’m blessed,’ to himself, he added aloud—

‘Eggskuse me a minute. Miss, till I clean myself up a bit,’ saying which he mounted the steps of his caravan and having entered it shut the door. The knight had disappeared to arm himself. When he returned he was found to have arrayed himself in a frock coat of strange shape and dimensions, a chimney pot hat of an early period was perched upon his head, and a red neckerchief flared upon his manly chest. He was a sartorially translated Hoppy and he blushed as he presented himself for the inspection of his young Mistress. No human eye in Wapshot had ever seen Hoppy in his gala dress. But Ruth was too absorbed in other thoughts to notice any peculiarity in the costume of her humble admirer. He felt re-assured at all events at this. It showed that there was nothing either ludicrous or repulsive in his garb. Heaven send that the

London gamin may take the same favourable view of it !

During his brief return to his habitation, Hoppy had put a couple of sovereigns in his pocket. He was a thoughtful squire of dames, and reflected that a lady travelling without the sanction of her father might be suspected of having a slenderly furnished purse.

Everything being now ready for his departure he looked round the estate to assure himself that all was right, threw a big bone to Brutus, opened the gate for Ruth, and then both trudged along the beaten road—he, from an early acquired habit, giving frequent glances behind him to assure himself that there was no pursuit.

At the railway station Ruth handed her purse to Hoppy, and requested him to take two tickets to London. He, however, motioned the proffered receptacle back, and, approaching the ticket office, demanded—

‘Two fusts to Lunnon.’

‘Return?’ inquired the clerk.

‘No—two sing’lars.’

Hoppy had never been in a first-class carriage in his life. But he knew what was due to the rank and station of his young mistress, and he would act up to that knowledge. He conducted her to an empty compartment, and, opening the door with an air that would have done no very great discredit to an earl, limped in after her, and opened the conversation in an easy and agreeable way. But poor Ruth was averse to conversation. She was experiencing her first knowledge of the bitterness of things. She was anxious and alarmed. Would that train *never* start?

It did eventually. Then she gazed fixedly out of the window. But she saw no objects distinctly, only vague masses of colour, mingling strangely, and rushing past her towards the Wapshot that she had abandoned. Hoppy, on the other hand, surveyed the landscape with the eye of an expert, and

criticised the fields as he passed, recording his opinion of the various styles of farming with the exactitude of a practised critic. Tired of this, he would glance shyly in the direction of Ruth, who sat still as a statue, gazing intently into space. Observing which, he merely repeated, softly, to himself, his favourite formula—

‘Well, I’m blessed!’

And, indeed, he had reason, for surely it should be accounted a blessed thing to be chosen as the travelling companion of a girl so young, so fresh, so innocent.

To her the journey seemed interminable, and she gave a great sigh of relief when the faithful Hoppy announced that they had arrived at the terminus.

With a consideration hardly to be expected in one of his station, Hoppy, when landed safely on the platform inquired in what direction they were now bent. Ruth gave him the address.

Then arose the perplexing question of

conveyance. Mr Molt had, as we have previously intimated, paid but one other visit to the Metropolis. On that occasion it became his business to visit Bethnal Green, and in Oxford Street he entered a vehicle, the conductor of which assured him that it was a Bethnal Green 'bus, and found himself in about an hour after safely landed in the fastnesses of Bayswater.

‘No more omni-li-busses for me,’ he said, as he approached the cab rank.

‘Ansom, sir,’ suggested a Jehu, pointing to his conveyance.

Hoppy gravely inspected the vehicle, inside and out, and ran his eye over the points of the horse with the air of a judge. Then, to the intense astonishment and disgust of the driver, he solemnly shook his head in severe disapproval of the construction of the vaunted hansom. He selected a four-wheeler of respectable antiquity as affording a means of transit more safe and more respectable.

In this obsolete and miserable conveyance the strangely assorted pair traversed that part of the town which lies between Waterloo station and the West End. Arrived at the direction given, the cabman drew up suddenly and, descending slowly, opened the door.

Ruth's pallor had increased, but there was a greater courage and determination in her tone as she said to Hoppy—

‘Please wait here till I return, Hoppy, and keep the cab.’

And with a firm step she entered the building.

END OF VOL. II







